

## Chris Marker (II)

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## Introduction

Author: Peter Kravanja

## Article

Pour ce deuxième numéro consacré à l'œuvre signé Chris Marker j'ai le plaisir de présenter aux lecteurs les contributions (par ordre alphabétique) de Christa Blümlinger, de Sarah Cooper, de Matthias De Groof, de Sylvain Dreyer, de Sarah French, d'Adrian Martin et de Susana S. Martins.

Christa Blümlinger voudrait saisir le statut théorique des mots et des images « trouvées » que *Level Five* intègre dans une recherche « semi-documentaire », à l'intérieur d'un dispositif lié aux nouveaux médias.

Vous pourrez ensuite découvrir la contribution de Sarah Cooper qui étudie le lien entre les œuvres d'André Bazin et de Chris Marker à partir de la fin des années 1940 jusqu'à la fin des années 1950 et au-delà. La distinction entre l'affiliation « rive droite » de Bazin avec *Les Cahiers du cinéma* d'une part, et, d'autre part, l'affiliation « rive gauche » de Marker est remise en question ici, dans la mesure où l'argumentaire cherche à brouiller les pistes de leur séparation idéologique conventionnelle. Sarah Cooper examine l'éloge de Bazin pour la technique de découpage de Marker et elle aborde aussi leurs différences et ressemblances politiques. Enfin, elle considère la question plus surprenante de la métaphysique, portant sur l'œuvre de Marker, et non celui de Bazin : un lien durable apparaît entre le critique et le cinéaste dans les écrits de Marker publiés dans le journal catholique de gauche *L'Esprit*, dont la ligne se prolongea au-delà de la mort de Bazin dans deux films que Marker réalisa au plus haut de la *nouvelle vague* : *Le Joli Mai* et *La Jetée*.

Matthias De Groof tente de caractériser le regard que *Les statues meurent aussi* porte sur l'art africain, alors que Sylvain Dreyer étudie la réception du *Fond de l'air est rouge*. Dans ce dernier film, Marker met en perspective l'engagement politique de sa génération et affronte la question des relations entre les mouvements français et les luttes du Tiers-monde. L'auteur conclut que *Le Fond de l'air est rouge* reste tributaire de l'esprit de Mai '68, notamment dans ses modes collectifs de réalisation et d'énonciation qui permettent une redéfinition de l'œuvre engagée au sein de l'ère du soupçon.

Ensuite, Sarah French analyse *Sans Soleil* en relation avec la théorie du sublime de Jean-François Lyotard. A travers une analyse de la représentation de la mémoire, du temps et de la temporalité du film, elle soutient que le film de Marker invoque d'une manière effective « l'irreprésentable dans la représentation même ».

Aussi, la contribution d'Adrian Martin brosse de manière créative un groupe d'artistes, d'écrivains et d'autres personnes particulières dont le travail ou la biographie peuvent être décrits comme montrant une étrange mais certaine connivence avec la carrière protéiforme de Chris Marker. Evitant les lieux communs (comme

Godard ou Sebald), l'auteur trace le pigiste Milt Machlin, le collectionneur de disques Harry Smith, le peintre Gianfranco Baruchello, l'écrivain et cinéaste Edgardo Cozarinsky, et quelques autres. De cette nébuleuse, émerge une vision particulière de la poétique markérienne, en rapport avec les significations de l'anonymat, de la narration, de l'histoire et du travail de mémoire.

Enfin, Susana S. Martins accorde une attention toute particulière à l'aspect photographique de la collection de livres de voyage *Petite Planète*, dont Chris Marker fut rédacteur de 1954 à 1958. A partir de l'analyse spécifique d'une courte série de photographies incluse dans le livre sur le Portugal, elle examine le rôle central de l'essai dans l'œuvre de Chris Marker, non seulement comme parti pris esthétique, mais plus encore comme forme privilégiée d'engagement politique.

Soulignant la qualité de ces deux numéros thématiques, je voudrais remercier les « lecteurs anonymes » pour l'enthousiasme avec lequel ils ont accepté de relire les propositions d'articles et pour la perspicacité de leurs remarques constructives, et, surtout, les auteurs pour la richesse de leurs connaissances qu'ils ont su, fort à propos, mettre au service de l'œuvre protéiforme de Chris Marker.

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## The Imaginary in the Documentary Image: Chris Marker's *Level Five*

Author: Christa Blümlinger

**Abstract (E):** This approach of *Level Five* by Chris Marker aims to grasp the theoretical status of "found" words and images, which are integrated by the filmmaker into a "semi-documentary" research, within a setting that is linked to the new media. Rather than considering them as pure documents, Marker is interested in their imaginary and discursive dimension. He integrates them into fragmentary writing that one could compare to modern forms of literature and historiography. Thus, the word "Okinawa" is the starting point of the research of a name, a discourse, an iconography and a myth. In the film, the discourse on the deaths refers to rituals of remembrance and repression; the images take the corresponding form of this labour: repetition and stoppage. For Marker the term «archeology» takes its Foucauldian dimension, in the sense that it considers facts of discourse (and of images) not as *documents*, but rather as *monuments*.

**Abstract (F):** Cette approche de *Level Five* de Chris Marker voudrait saisir le statut théorique des mots et des images "trouvées" que le cinéaste intègre dans une recherche "semi-documentaire", à l'intérieur d'un dispositif lié aux nouveaux médias. Plutôt que de les considérer comme purs documents, Marker s'intéresse à leur dimension imaginaire et discursive. Il les intègre dans une écriture fragmentaire comparable aux formes modernes de littérature et d'historiographie. Ainsi le mot "Okinawa" est-il à l'origine d'une recherche de nom, de discours, d'iconographie et de mythe. Dans le film, le discours sur les morts se réfère aux rituels du souvenir et du refoulement; dans l'analyse du film, les images prennent la forme correspondante de ce travail : la répétition et l'arrêt. Chez Marker, la notion d'archéologie prend sa dimension foucauldienne, dans la mesure où il considère les faits de discours (et d'images) non point comme *documents*, mais comme *monuments*.

**keywords:** archive, documentary, essay, archeology of the gaze, historicity of images, archival art film, migration of images.

### *Article*

When Nicole Védres's compilation film *Paris 1900* was first released, André Bazin issued this frankly programmatic statement: "One should not, however, believe that the authors' merits are diminished by the exclusive use of newsreel footage. On the contrary, their success can be traced to a subtle working of the medium, to the cleverness of their selection from an immense body of material; to the delicacy and the intelligence of the editing, to all the tools of taste and culture used to tame the phantoms" (Bazin 1958, 41f). It is no accident that decades later Chris Marker employs "found footage" from this

very film in *Level Five* (1997), which can be called a kind of science-fiction documentary. In the program of his retrospective at the Cinémathèque Française in 1998, Marker noted: "I owe everything to Nicole Védres", and as a reply in a sense to Bazin, he went on: "Here it is not a question of the intelligence of the filmmaker, rather of the previously only somewhat acknowledged idea that the intelligence could be found in the source material, the raw material from which the commentary and the editing proceed, obtaining from them an object, namely Film."

One could characterize Marker's films – to paraphrase Gilles Deleuze loosely – as a cinema of the brain that revolves around the question of memory. Proceeding from complex forms of memory established by Bergson, Deleuze defined the "direct image of time" (1991) as a "pure" optical image, which does not tend towards action or movement, but rather relates to the "recollection-images" it actualizes. One might further consider Marker as a historiographer: his films devote themselves preeminently to that which is now absent, and their discourse on the past is, like the historiographies analyzed by de Certeau, always a discourse on the dead. In this sense, the writing of history is a discourse in the third person, which is characterized by a periodic interval between author and object: "The dead man is the objective figure of an exchange among the living" (de Certeau 1975, 60). Marker's origins lie in a "modern" aesthetics of the post-war period; his films, like those of Alain Resnais, could be characterized as a cinema based on "beings" who are born from one death and who are moving towards another death – a cinema the horizon of which is composed of Auschwitz and Hiroshima (cf. Deleuze 1985, 271).

In Marker's work the status of the document and the conception of history are affected by media and mediation, and in that perspective advance progressively, from his earliest films on. They always stress on a certain "*dispositif*" which can be understood as the spatial or symbolic disposition of gaze characterizing a medium. What is to some extent the question here is a "diegeticized" *dispositif*, since *Level Five* is a film documentary, not a computer game; images and machines of the electronic network determine the "fictional" frame of this "documentary" film. This film, set in cyberspace as a diegeticized *dispositif*, throws its own discursive position into question, and investigates the theoretical meaning that any "found" material within it thereby possesses. Moreover, following Jacques Rancière (1998, 47), one could suggest that the era of cinema coincides with the era of history in its modern conception: the question of the inscription/recording of history in film takes shape in a quite complex manner, first through a questioning of the film's type of plot (*type d'intrigue*), second of the film's memorializing function (*fonction de mémorialisation*), and finally as the ways and means that a film attests to participation in a common destiny. It is on all three levels that this film works: there is the question of hybridity (between fiction and documentary), the question of the film's (internal and external) memory and the question of a (global) community. One can say that *Level Five* is a *semi-documentary* film. Its press release offered a "definition" of the film as semi-documentary, adding to it

a double quotation: "A documentary is a film without women. If there is a woman in it, it is a semi-documentary. – Harry Crohn, head of Columbia, quoted by Fred Zinneman, *An Autobiography*. Accordingly, *Level Five* is a semi-documentary". The wit in this quotation comes out of the interesting idea that the discursive structure of a documentary film can also be ascertained by something like a gender-*dispositif* that engages the desire of the spectator. Laura's mirror-gaze into the camera, which she now and again focuses with a remote control, radically embodies her male counterpart's absence.

First, a short description of the film. In *Level Five* the protagonist, Laura (Catherine Belkhodja), who is secluded from the world, yet connected to the internet, performs a special task: she is trying to finish writing a computer game dedicated to the history of the last island of the Japanese archipelago, Okinawa. It is the type of strategy game that usually affords the opportunity to win lost battles, yet here the aim is the repetition and remembering of history. Above all, the game deals with a tragedy that is scarcely known in the West, and the occurrence of which played a decisive role in the Second World War: in 1945, one third of the citizens of this island obeyed the Japanese command to kill themselves rather than fall into the hands of their American foes. Laura searches for information about Okinawa on a computer interface named O.W.L. ("Optional Word Link"), which she links to various information networks, current and future. Laura's interlocutors, with whom she develops her computer game – or, to whom she dedicates it – are not visible. When she speaks at her electronic workstation, she most often directly addresses the camera that stands for someone unknown, a deceased loved person or the filmmaker, "Chris", whose voice emerges from offscreen from time to time, out of the Japanese present. These commentaries form a complementary plane to Laura's cyber-search for historical material.

In Laura's electronic sphere, written and image-based documents of the most diverse origins are summoned and manipulated. The images here are less significant in themselves than as proof for the reconstruction of an incident. Rather, they are *read* with regard to their ambivalence and historicity. What the images do not show becomes, in the process of reading, just as substantial as what they do show. In *Level Five* these images are about decades-long oppression and repression. Chris Marker says in the press release for the film in a (presumably fictional) interview with Dolores Walfisch: "These days much is being said about a CD-ROM on World War II. Look up Okinawa: 'The Japanese lost 110,000 people, many of those civilians...' Double error: the Japanese *military* losses amounted in fact to around 100,000; those civilians were the inhabitants of Okinawa, an autonomous collective, who have their own history and culture [...]. The total count of their dead is estimated at 150,000, one-third of the population of the island [...]. It is this unique example, one of the craziest, most murderous episodes of the Second World War, forgotten by history, stricken from collective memory, that I wanted to bring back to light."

Here, however, largely unknown documents and testimonials from the period do not serve the purpose of turning the spectator into some imaginary "Master of the Archive," as has become customary with the opening of hitherto inaccessible archives, especially on television (see Comolli quoted by Roskins 1997, p. 32). Instead, each document represents not so much history itself but the history of the social approach to it.

Thus historical, mediated context of the documentary material discloses its iconographic representation and mythical dimensions. The example of the American representation of its battles in the Pacific makes this especially clear. The U.S. Army's victory on the islands surrounding Japan culminated in a heroic symbolic gesture that ultimately ignored that victory's results: an immense loss of civilian life. Marker analyzes what became a serially engendered *Mythologem*: in a war film by Allan Dwan from 1949 (*Sands of Iwo Jima*) one sees John Wayne hoisting the American flag on the battlefield. This significant pose stands in an iconographic series, which Marker candidly shows in a sort of Warburgian approach. Aby Warburg analyzed images of the body with the concept of the "Pathosformeln", which represents a reservoir of images of cultural memories and which is based on a theory of art that stresses the dynamic potential for expression in the plastic arts and painting (cf. Warburg 1979). The pose from the film is followed by a photograph of American Marines in Iwo Jima, whose pose represents the taking possession of territory in a similar way. The figurative pattern of this image (in terms of Aby Warburg: this *Pathosformula*) of the Marines repeats itself, as *Level Five* connects what Laura calls "one of the icons of our time" to a series of related images, spanning decades and including caricatures and portrayals of war, right up to the latest entrance of American UN troops in former Yugoslavia. Marker is not, however, satisfied with an iconographic reading of the images, and instead dedicates himself to an investigation of the history of these images and their actors. He examines this war after the war, this "war of images". What happened, for instance, to the inconsequential Marine named Ira Hayes, who well after the battle had been won rammed the Stars and Stripes into Japanese soil for a counterfeit picture? And how did John Wayne, wearing a cowboy outfit in a "morale-boosting" feature film, happen to get shown to real soldiers in a military hospital? In contrast, how long would John Huston's "demoralizing" film *Let there be Light* (1946), which comes to terms with Iwo Jima as a soldiers' trauma, not be shown to the American public?

Marker's approach is a historical one, not only on an aesthetical, iconological level. It takes the use of images by the media into account, as a part of the history of images themselves. Here lies a critical dimension that aims at the media apparatus and that can be compared to the task of a historian who tries to get back to the sources and to take some distance at the same time. The more mediated representations copy themselves, the more they suppress into nonexistence that which they apprehend. The media – television first and foremost – overvalue what they produce in a process Pierre Nora calls the *creation of an event* [*créer l'événement*]. Michèle Lagny sees this process as the founding of the

paradoxical status of a film-image that displaces recollection; the film-image allies itself with the flow of memory in order to become the memory-image. To Lagny the cinema counteracts the establishment of what Pierre Nora has described as a certain "distance-memory" operating in historiographic discourse: no sooner does history seize upon that which it calls memory – those vestiges that allow it to construct itself – than it distances, mediates, and kills it (Nora 1974 and Lagny 1991, 69 and 72). Even if this critical undertaking of historiography is not the result of some compelling drive for truth, it is nonetheless concerned with having something "signify". Whereas, as soon as television asserts itself as the reservoir of memory, recollection is delegated to the television-archive as the place of memory: the effect of immediacy and the accessibility of the visual document are more primary here than its meaning. Straightforward television formats that use archive-images to merely illustrate an event, or, more often, use established experts to gloss them as memory-images, privilege the affective as opposed to the reflexive dimension of the images, and thereby deprive the spectator of the possibility of distance.

It is precisely this distance from images from the archive material that *Level Five* establishes: as with the aforementioned images of territorial annexation, Marker provides a close reading of the famous snapshot of an unknown soldier collapsing while burning like a human torch. As Laura explains to her imaginary interlocutor, this image – which appears in numerous documentary films, be they about Okinawa or Vietnam – actually came from Borneo. The history of this unknown soldier is already mentioned in the collective film orchestrated by Marker, *Loin du Viet-Nam* (1967), in one of the episodes realized by Alain Resnais. In *Level Five*, Laura gives the unknown a name (she calls him Gustave), in order to be able to ascribe a history to him: "What's most interesting is that at the end of the first take one sees that he's not dead. He gets back up. Maybe not altogether sprightly, though one might nevertheless believe that he has another chance to escape, like the napalm-afflicted kids from Saigon." The burning man, who has always been shown only up to a certain point in his collapse, has become a mediated prop. Marker presents this shot twice, the first time shorter and in a schematic (digitally altered) form, the second time longer and in its original figurative form. Each time the final moment of the shot is briefly frozen. This stoppage shows three things, given the figuratively and temporally differing repetition: first, the significance of cutting and montage for the status of the visual "document," second, the mortifying dimension of any documentarism that wants to *display* the war, and third, the ossification of a documentary shot into a cliché.

To return to the emphasis Marker places on montage in the "Gustave"-sequence first, the filmmaker shares a conception of montage with Godard, the "transcendental conditions" which Giorgio Agamben (1996) has also aligned with repetition on the one hand and the stoppage on the other: repetition as reproduction of the possibility of what was, and the stoppage as the potential for the revolutionary "disruption" of a cycle (to use Walter Benjamin's term). This kind of disruption of a movement allows



a new constellation, a look at the past from the very present. But there is another effect that has to do with the affective dimension of the image. The cinematic image that (in contrast to the photographic) usually affirms a present more than a past, is here arrested and thus gets a photographic effect. This leads back to the second point of the effect of the stoppage, the mortifying dimension. The inscription of the future death in this image is not only the effect of the repetition and the commentary, but also owes to a kind of photographic effect Roland Barthes (1980) describes as the famous *has-been*. Finally coming back to the third point, the ossification of a moving image into an endlessly duplicated cliché, the argument is not that one does necessarily draw nearer to the "historical truth" by looking at the "original document". Yet what is reawakened here, in the face of a specific "document," is the memorability of a history extinguished by the discursive indifference of the audio-visual institution. Marker's pedagogy counters a tendency toward acquiescence that reinforces itself in the era of a centralized and digitized archive of images.

Marker exhibits the same attention to images as he does to words. History and memory do not constitute themselves without verbal designations. For this reason, names and places in *Level Five* are not merely signifiers as documentary references, but rather also as mythological crystallizations. They present themselves as discursive chains. "Okinawa" leads Marker all the way to Chateaubriand's autobiographical novel *Mémoires d'Outre-Tombe*. In that novel, an English captain tells Napoleon an anecdote about a peculiar Pacific isle called Okinawa where people possess no weapons; in Napoleon's eyes, this is a "despicable" quality. Laura is the "other" voice of the filmmaker who only speaks in the past and always in voice-over, adopting a position from the beyond, similar to Chateaubriand's in his memoirs. At the end of the film, in the absence of the filmmaker, Laura illustrates her blind gaze to which there is no counter-shot, as an anticipation of the future: "Do I see myself in ten years, separated from you, getting news of your death from the paper, feeling a vague impression of déjà-vu [...]" Laura said before what "Okinawa" means to her: "I can recognize myself again in this small island, because my sorrow is so unique, so intimate and also the most banal, most simple, which is why it can't be given a name that sounds like a song, like a film, *Okinawa mon Amour...*". With this reference to Alain Resnais' film on Hiroshima, Marker indicates the constructive principle behind *Level Five*: the linkage of a fictional, subjective history (Laura) with the real yet finally indescribable history of a collective annihilation (Okinawa).

For Marker, the computer, the new image-editing machines and the electronic network are, in contrast to television, a place for reflection: in his *Hypertext* it is no longer a question of manufacturing effects of authenticity through representation by a (linear) narration of an event, but instead a possibility of constructing an abundance of contexts and connections. These contexts are constituted by Laura's and Chris' commentaries, but also around the surface of the computer game Laura is designing. That surface is certainly formed visually as images, yet it is also quite literally *written*. In contrast to

historiographical texts and "classic" historical documentary films, the film *Level Five* generally uses the rhetoric of an autobiographical text and establishes a first-person account (alternating between Chris, the filmmaker, and his female alter ego Laura). The radically subjective position of this address constitutes the relay between the persons who speak in this film as the ones who are implicated as witnesses, and the spectator.

Interviews, one of which Marker conducted with one of the survivors of the collective suicides ordered by the Japanese army, as well as those he conducted with the filmmaker Nagisa Oshima, are visually superscribed and downloaded, so to speak, in the computer. A red cursor elects and remains, for example, on "witnesses" or "media coverage", only to have further options light up under "request", and, eventually, to leave the question as a dead-end. Consequently, during the closing words of the sequence in question, one of Marker's interview partners can at this moment regain full visual presence: "I believe the war isn't over yet," says Kenji Togitsu, a young Japanese, thereby casting uncertainty over the ruins which mark the extensive destruction of Okinawa. Something unspeakable clings to this tragedy, Laura later remarks, as she chooses the option "bibliography" after "media coverage": "Here one discovers [...] that no book exists that could make it understandable that a sixteen-year-old child kills his mother because an invisible camera lies in wait for him, and he cannot refuse to obey it." Laura's multimedia investigation of Okinawa is finally a question of the (non-)representability of this story.

Accordingly, those people whom Marker questions today do not merely speak about a bygone event, but also about its recollection, and about memory as tied to a location. "I, the I that so very much loves the old culture, am utterly despondent when I come to Okinawa," says Oshima. In the fifties Oshima had filmed families in mourning for children who had met their ends in 1944 on a military transport ship that was supposed to save them. Marker annotates two archival images of farewells, a "real" one in black-and-white and Oshima's later documentary shots of a memorial service, a "symbolic" one in color. With these two images he conveys the discourse of an historian (one who is present in the now) about the absent (those who disappeared at that time): "Even before the battle began, Okinawa already had its dead – without knowing it. The survivors had been ordered to send postcards saying everything had gone well." These commentaries and documentary material, originating at different times but still acting in concert, work in a strikingly similar manner to the concept behind Alain Resnais' *Nuit et Brouillard*, a film Marker contributed to substantially (Jousse 1995, 77 and Kämper/Tode 1997, 372). As was the case with Resnais' film, this film transforms the relationship between history and memory into the question of the function of the image (Lagny 1991, 75) and it raises the question of the history of the gaze (Lindeperg, 2007). The film presents itself as the location of memory, where the mere exercise of memory becomes an interrogation of memory itself.

Marker's proceeding with "found" (film-)histories, which he feeds into his machines to rearrange them within a polyvalent discourse, shares many qualities, formal and otherwise, with Jean-Luc Godard's definite video-statement on the cinema: *Histoire(s) du Cinéma*. In a philosophical essay on the historicity of cinema, Jacques Rancière accounts for the similarities between these two films in which the machine of vision transforms itself momentarily into a typewriter as follows: "In them the documentary film realizes in its radicality this identity of thought, of *écriture*, and of the visible, which together lie at the core of aesthetic thought itself and its 'historical' capacity" (Rancière 1998, 57). Godard and Marker's aesthetic program inclines, says Rancière, toward the tradition of German Romanticism, as the art of combining symbols of variable nature, intensity and meaning – toward what he calls "aesthetic regime of art". In this respect, this form of documentary film (as opposed to the Aristotelian stringing-together of transactions, forming the basis of the narrative-representative film) is for Rancière cinema par excellence. History is understood as discourse by Godard and Marker, and as such it can be traced in a history of images. For both filmmakers, the media-apparatus invariably distances the original cinematic or photographic images. Video, television, and computer do not substitute for cinema here, but instead are, to a certain extent, its vestige. Yet, regarding the very idea about the function of cinema, there are certain differences between the aesthetics of Godard and Marker that Rancière's later texts will stress on (Rancière 2006).

In Marker's CD-ROM *Immemory* (1997), a rigorous continuation of his work on the art of memory, the mediated rereading of cinema-images establishes a corresponding aesthetic position. Marker claims: "In that it changes into a smaller object, in the face of which one lowers one's eyes, the cinema loses its essence. One can be moved by the trace it leaves behind, this portrait of recollection one considers as a photo of some beloved creature to be carried around on one's person, one can see the shadow of a film on television, the longing for a film, the nostalgia, the echo of a film, but never a film". As Raymond Bellour argues in his essay about *Immemory* (1997, 101ff), although Godard and Marker start out with a shared nostalgia, they nonetheless show fundamentally different attitudes concerning cinema: while Godard concedes an ontological privilege to the (cinematographic) image, by contrasting the recording of reality with its "resurrection" through projection (see *Histoire(s) du cinéma IA*, 1989), Marker understands cinema within a more comprehensive culture of images, the tragic nature of which lies in the death it embodies, and in the work of recollection it helps preserve.

Nevertheless, Marker's aesthetics can also be labeled Bazinian, although not so much in terms of Bazin's famous formula "montage forbidden" which is a rejection of the biased interpretation of reality by certain "classic" editing techniques in order to emphasize what is random and ambiguous in an image. Rather, Marker's aesthetics line up with the consequences of Bazin's formula, which Pascal Bonitzer (1982, 127) appropriately deemed his essential question of the cinema vis-à-vis the impression of reality: that of the political and ethical use of images. Thus, confronted with the moving

image of the burning soldier, for example, Marker does not object to the direct representation of death as a kind of ontological obscenity (as Bazin probably would have done); instead, he critiques its manipulation according to demand and context.

As far as editing goes, Marker by-passes the unequivocal Kuleshov-effect, despised by Bazin, through the fragmentary form by which images as well as words are presented. His commentaries are more closely related to the essay, the maxim and the aphorism than to narrative; the visual track is presented as sectional and the visible always refers to its proper framing. Marker's images are transformed in the process of rereading: they are slowed down, stopped, reframed, multiplied, they overlap, are converted to pixels, sometimes edited unto abstraction by use of the computer (in the credits for *Level Five* the relevant computer programs are listed), and above all put into a dialogic relationship to writing and commentary. One of the film's key sequences exemplifies this method of reading. It meticulously analyzes a few very brief takes: in 1945, one of the Marines' cameras registers a Saipan woman's suicidal fall with an ambivalent complicity; her last glance is meant for the eye of the enemy. Marker associates this unfortunate inclusion of the camera-witness with a shot from *Paris 1900* (the compilation film by Nicole Védres mentioned above): a man prepares himself to jump from the Eiffel Tower with the aid of some ill-advised flying contraption. After a short hesitation he assures himself that the camera will capture his daring deeds and, despite his all-too justified doubts, plunges off the tower. Through enlargement, slow motion, concealment, repetition and stoppage, *Level Five* gradually draws the spectator's attention to the gaze of those who are, quite literally, driven by the camera, which has their death in its lens. What becomes clear at those moments is that even if the individual returns the camera-gaze it is and remains above all the subject of representation. This camera-gaze represents a kind of social agency through which we are selected (or not) for the spectacle.

The camera's function in this scene of self-destruction at the Eiffel Tower is paradoxical: it confers an identity and a memorability upon the subject, while simultaneously imbuing its image with an effect of fascination and so deadly fixing the subject. This scene evokes the double construction of preservation and destruction. One can say with Lacan (1973, 107) that there is a fatal fixation of the subject in a dimension of the power of the gaze that can halt and fix the movement – this is what he calls *Fascinum*. By associating this kind of fascinated camera-gaze with a meta-gaze, Marker underlines in *Level Five* the double nature of the shots as fragments of space and moments of time-stoppage. André Bazin has commented on this same turn-of-the-century footage of the "bird-man" in a manner similar to Marker: "But the camera is there, it stares at him eternally, and finally he does not dare disappoint its soulless eye. Had only human witnesses been present, a prudent cowardice would have overwhelmed him" (1958, 41f). For Bazin this shot stands for the dual character of a medium that in contrast to literature casts an impersonal gaze on history that cannot regain the times for us, but rather lets the times be lost once again. In *Paris 1900* and *Level Five* it is not a question of the Proustian joy

of remembrance (the theme of *Sans Soleil*), but rather of "found" and therefore "unfamiliar" recollections that, in the same vein as Bazin, constitute each and every film-image for the spectator.

The essential problem *Level Five* puts to the computer user (who represents the spectator), is: what is a document? And more precisely: what does "documentary image" mean? Numerous shots and "readings" of monuments, rituals of mourning, lists of names, memorials and graveyards are found in this film: its fragmentary narrative is accompanied by analysis of social discourse on historical events. Yet the analysis of the battle's "documentary" image-material has the question of its monumentalization in view. Marker's commentary distills this nearly to the point of a single image, which, contrary to the photos of mass suicide, was immediately mediated: "Two weeks later one of the most famous photos of the battle depicted a little girl leaving a grotto with a white flag, attended by tattered civilians and soldiers. Okinawa's memory was meant to retain this symbolic sight: a child who had survived the army's suicide instructions was sent ahead in order to protect the rest of this army."

This "theoretical" approach to archive material is not unrelated to Michel Foucault's conception of an archaeology of knowledge. In the discussion about documentary images, too, one could attend to the discursive nature of facts within an "archive", in order to understand them not any longer as "documents" (of a hidden truth or a code), but as *monuments*: with Foucault this archive would be "neither the entirety of the texts [in our case: images] preserved by a civilization, nor the ensemble of traces one could have rescued from its destruction, but rather the series of rules that in a culture determines the appearance and the disappearance of statements (*énoncés*), their survival and their obliteration, their paradoxical existence as *events* and as *things*" (Foucault 1994, 708). This Foucauldian analysis of scientific discourse is by no means meant to be directly applied to the cinema. Nevertheless, the epistemological discussion of history seems to me in some respect to illuminate the function of the modern media archive, especially as Marker presents it.

The main work of a memory culture is made up of more than mere documents, more than the referential bearing on a historical event or context. In *Level Five* we do not see the traces of suicidal hand grenades on the wall of a grotto, but rather the corresponding dioramas and photographs in nearby museums, the arrangement of the lists of names and rows of portraits as "contestants of memory." The imaginary of images here takes precedence over their documentary discursive character. It inserts distance into the relationship between a historical site and what is real, or what is past. Marker's images and words are never intended to serve as "pure" documents, even when they invoke verbal or photographic testimony. It is not a question here of demonstrating a story's veracity, even when Marker's historical referents are valid. The power of *Level Five*'s imagination lies in its arrangement of signs, a dimension of myth-making that is more concerned with the (de-)construction of recollection than the reconstruction of history. Raymond Bellour's statement about Marker's CD-

ROM, that it is a "self-portrait in process," just as well holds for *Level Five*: "Marker doesn't narrate – he arranges signs, he peruses them hastily, heaps them up and places them together; his fiction originates through its *mise en circulation*" (1997, 90).

The "present" images from Marker's electronic frame, which give particulars about the making of *Level Five*, are already understood from a (fictive) future position to be monuments: "In the prehistoric time of *Minitel* one used pseudonyms; here one could borrow virtual masks", says "Marker" (the filmmaker's invisible voice) about one of Laura's journeys into the future over the O.W.L.-interface, the "network of networks". The computer game is handled like a visit to a graveyard – as a modern burial ritual. In this sense, Marker/Laura describes our media age, anticipating, in an ironic manner, the perspective of an ethnologist from the future: "It was a prevalent custom with these peoples to be guided by a well-known protective spirit, which was called among certain tribes 'computer,' and among others 'ordinateur'. You asked it about its opinion about everything, you entrusted your memory to it, you actually no longer had any memory, it was your memory."

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## Note

This text was written more than ten years ago and therefore does not take in account recent studies of the film, neither the actual development of technological devices of the internet (and related theories within media studies). It was first published in German as: "Das Imaginäre des dokumentarischen Bildes: Chris Markers *Level Five*", in: *montage/av*, 7/2/1998. Engl. translation first published in: *Iris* n° 29, Spring 2000 (Iowa), p. 133-142, translated by Andrew Gilligan. The author would like to thank Maureen Turim and especially Hilary Radner for helping to revise the translation from German into English. For the ultimate revision of the translation (2009), thanks to Evelien van Vessem.

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## Montage, Militancy, Metaphysics: Chris Marker and André Bazin

Author: Sarah Cooper

**Abstract (E):** This article focuses on the relationship between the work of André Bazin and Chris Marker from the late 1940s through to the late 1950s and beyond. The division between Bazin's 'Right Bank' affiliation with *Les Cahiers du Cinéma* on the one hand, and Marker's 'Left Bank' allegiances on the other, is called into question here as my argument seeks to muddy the waters of their conventional ideological separation across the river Seine. Working alliteratively through Marker's well-known talent for deft montage along with his militancy, I consider Bazin's praise for Marker's editing technique – in spite of famously expressing a preference elsewhere for the long take, and deep focus cinematography – and I address their political differences and convergences. Yet I also explore the rather more unexpected question of metaphysics in order to further emphasize a closer relationship between these two figures. I chart the emergence of an enduring spiritual bond between critic and filmmaker that surfaces first in Marker's writings for the left-wing Catholic journal *L'Esprit*, but that continues beyond Bazin's death, in Marker's two films made on the crest of the French New Wave: *Le Joli Mai* and *La Jetée*.

**Abstract (F):** Cet article traite du lien entre les œuvres d'André Bazin et de Chris Marker à partir de la fin des années 1940 jusqu'à la fin des années 1950 et au-delà. La distinction entre l'affiliation « rive droite » de Bazin avec *Les Cahiers du cinéma* d'une part, et, d'autre part, l'affiliation « rive gauche » de Marker est remise en question ici, dans la mesure où mon argumentaire cherche à brouiller les pistes de leur séparation idéologique conventionnelle. Avec un clin d'œil allitératif, creusant le talent bien connu de Marker pour un montage subtil ainsi que son militantisme, j'examine l'éloge de Bazin pour la technique de découpage de Marker – et ce, malgré sa préférence célèbre pour le plan séquence et le champ en profondeur – et j'aborde aussi leurs différences et ressemblances politiques. Enfin, je considère la question plus surprenante de la métaphysique, portant sur l'œuvre de Marker, et non celui de Bazin : un lien durable apparaît entre le critique et le cinéaste dans les écrits de Marker publiés dans le journal catholique de gauche *L'Esprit*, dont la ligne se prolongea au-delà de la mort de Bazin dans deux films que Marker réalisa au plus haut de la *nouvelle vague* : *Le Joli Mai* et *La Jetée*.

**keywords:** montage, militancy, metaphysics, New Wave, Left Bank, Right Bank, André Bazin



## *Article*

The early years of Chris Marker's career as writer and filmmaker testify to a prolific output within a wider artistic context of intense aesthetic innovation and a tense socio-political climate characterized by Cold War anxieties, along with the stirrings of revolution. The formal choices that he makes in order to render his politicized filmmaking most effective have prompted a critical concern with his status as a "montage ace" (to coin Laura's designation of him thus in *Level 5* (1996)) and as a militant. In this article, I wish to add to these categories by attending to a spiritual dimension that is also apparent in his work but that is rarely singled out for comment. To this end, I focus on a selection of his films and writings from the 1950s through to the 1960s, in tandem with the work of one of his most famous respondents, André Bazin. Bazin had a special relationship with Marker and his work and in the 1950s this leading critic was one of Marker's greatest champions. J Dudley Andrew observes that Marker was present in Bazin's office at Travail et Culture at the discussions in the late 1940s of his friend Alain Resnais's recent documentary *Van Gogh* (1948) (Andrew 90). Their bond continues in print through Bazin's readings of Marker's early work and, after Bazin's death, through Marker's defence of Bazin's political mind against rebukes from Stalinists and Leninists (Marker cited in Andrew 137). Using their textual encounters as a basis from which to chart their correspondences and divergences, I want to proceed alliteratively here by focusing on questions of montage, militancy, and metaphysics as they relate both filmmaker and critic to one another. The question of metaphysics in particular suggests a profound connection between Bazin and Marker, which can be glimpsed in some of Marker's writings on film, but which surfaces most significantly through the filmmaker's rebirth on the crest of the new wave in 1962.

### **Spiritual Beginnings: Bazin's Ontological Realism**

In a special issue devoted to the new wave, published by *Les Cahiers du cinéma* in 1962, a chronological list of dates for the new cinema works back to 1945, and its founding text is André Bazin's signal essay "Ontologie de l'image photographique" (*Les Cahiers du cinéma*, December 1962). For Bazin, writing in 1945, the very being of cinema is rooted famously in photography. The photograph, like the ancient Egyptian process of mummification, which he links to the origins of statuary, is a form of preservation that is directed against death. To photograph someone is not to overcome their literal death, according to Bazin, but to save them from a second spiritual death. Photography hereby embalms a moment in time. As a logical extension of this, Bazin understands filmic images to capture temporal duration and to mummify change (Bazin 2002: 9-17). The spiritual survival of the photographic subject after their inevitable physical death has a religious association for Bazin. The one image that accompanies "Ontologie de l'image photographique" is of the Turin shroud (ibid: 15). The imprint of Christ on the holy shroud serves to illustrate how a material substance is

impressed upon by an indexical trace. Bazin's faith in the mummified endurance of the photographed or filmed subject thus lies at the heart of his definition of ontological realism, which is expanded further in cinematic terms as his work progresses.

Although this ontological argument runs through the entirety of his work, "Ontologie de l'image photographique" was Bazin's only in-depth exploration of the photographic image. One of the reasons why his subsequent focus shifted towards cinema without recourse to further discussion of the photograph is to be found in a later essay, "Montage interdit", first published in *Les Cahiers du cinéma* in 1953. While the title may suggest a total interdiction on montage – its capacity to divide up the reality recorded and to reconstruct it creatively in the editing room – Bazin's argument is subtler. Bazin favours duration and preservation of the space-time continuum over its dissection where relevant to the subjects of particular films. Certain shots – the long-take or the sequence shot – permit sustained contact with the space-time continuum of what is filmed. In Bazin's view, to break up the continuity and simultaneity of observation permitted in such shots through recourse to montage would be to weaken the force of the film. Bazin contrasts the use of such contrasting techniques as they appear in films by Lamorisse, Flaherty, Welles, Chaplin and Hitchcock, noting their strengths and weaknesses. Bazin's interest in duration also constitutes the Bergsonian strand of his work, registered most explicitly in his reading of Henri-Georges Clouzot's *Le Mystère Picasso* (1956) ("Un film bergsonien: *Le Mystère Picasso*"), in which we see paintings by the artist unfold, or sometimes be erased, before our eyes while the camera is focused largely in duration shots on the canvas. Bergson is to be found in Bazin's belief in the rather more intuitive grasp of the universe in flux that is gained by avoiding the tendency of dividing the world up into fragments. The spiritual survival of the photographed subject that was first made apparent in Bazin's 1945 essay now becomes a facet of a broader cinematic ontological realism, which focuses attention on capturing the flow of time through the image the better to forge a correspondence between the world and the beyond. Although far from the exclusive focus of Bazin's film criticism and theory, he did, as Dudley Andrew points out, concentrate "to a remarkable extent on films with a religious dimension" (Andrew 23). Marker might be thought to stand apart from this kind of filmmaking in more ways than one, and his pervasive interest in montage suggests a rather more continuous use of this technique than Bazin's argument in "Montage interdit" advocates. Indeed, Marker's desire to interpret the world through film, rather than just lay it bare, has led critics to note a distance between his work and that of Bazin (Alpigiano 26). While it is useful to note this division here, the apparent difference between their religious and ideological positions is only one facet of a deeper and more complex relationship between Bazin and Marker.

For Antoine de Baecque, who writes meticulously about the influence the co-founder of *Les Cahiers du cinéma* had on the editorial board's beliefs, the foundation of Bazin's definition of ontological

realism places a spiritual position at their very core, and opposes the journal to Marxist and Surrealist oriented reviews (De Baecque 83). De Baecque cites an indirect exchange between Bazin and Marker in *Cahiers* in consecutive issues in 1951, which serves to crystallize positions that divide across spiritual and political lines. Bazin's article on Bresson's style in *Journal d'un curé de campagne* (1951) is a key piece in working through his spiritual stance, and his reading of the film understands it to take us on a journey through the Stations of the Cross (Bazin, "Le Journal d'un curé de campagne" 14). Less by way of a direct response, but certainly seeing access to another reality very differently from the way in which Bazin does, Marker in a subsequent special issue of *Cahiers* on German cinema could not be more contrasting (Marker, "Siegfried et les Argousins" 4-11). In "Siegfried et les Argousins", Marker comments at length on the relative indifference that German cinema had been shown after the war, and compares this with the example of Italy, clearly referring to *Cahiers* which had not only commented at length on neo-realist films, but had followed the spiritual bent of Bazin. Praising the realism of the East German cinema, Marker criticizes the spiritual symbolism of the West, casting it as a refusal to see the real. As De Baecque points out, he turns Bazin's argument inside out, seeing religion here as a mask placed over the real, rather than the real as point of connection to the beyond. This difference is indicative for De Baecque of the deeper Marxist fault-lines that form such a strong point of debate in the ensuing arguments exchanged between Left and Right Bank filmmakers of the new wave (De Baecque 84). The other reality that replaces the spiritual beyond is politically aligned with the ideological thrust that will overcome *Cahiers* in the backlash against Bazin sometime after his death in the late 1960s and 1970s. However, while the spiritual and political division between Bazin and Marker is palpable and has been articulated persuasively by critics, I want to complicate such a vision of their separation here and bring the two closer together. Bazin's own writing facilitates such proximal contact, since he produces several significant articles in the 1950s on Marker's early films. Bazin's readings forge relations between materiality and a spiritual dimension by focusing on the very technique that he approached critically in "Montage interdit". It is through Bazin's praise of Marker's use of montage that we begin to see how the two figures are closer than they at first seem.

### **Bazin on Marker**

In addition to writing a warm review of Marker's book *Giraudoux par lui-même* for *Esprit* (Bazin 1952), Bazin wrote a series of articles for *France-Observateur* on Marker's films in the 1950s, dating back to the early collaboration with Resnais on *Les Statues meurent aussi* (1950-1953). Like several of Marker's films in these early years, this one was banned upon completion, and relegated to a shadow zone, to join what Chris Darke aptly terms the works of Marker's lost period (Darke 48). In Bazin's first article, "Les Films meurent aussi" of 1957, death by censorship is his focus and he comments on the lengthy saga of this film's plight. He laments the fact that the most dazzling parts are in the banned section, in which he singles out Marker's "éblouissante analyse de la situation spirituelle de l'homme

noir à travers le monde” (Bazin, “Les Films meurent aussi” 19). He also comments that this is where the filmmakers have used montage in a brilliant but new way: “tout à la fois poétique et intellectuelle, jouant simultanément du choc de la beauté des images, et de la conflagration de leur sens, cependant que le texte intervient comme la main qui entrechoque les silex (ibid).” The figure of speech that designates the impact of text on image is materialist and suggests that it is through the collision of the two – the text striking the beauty of the images and the conflagration of their meaning – that the spiritual situation referred to above is crafted. This vision of a material process that provides access to the spiritual, links Bazin’s criticism to Marker’s films in the years to come.

Bazin develops his observations regarding montage in articles on two subsequent films of the 1950s. Writing about *Dimanche à Pékin* (1956) months later, he describes this short as a perfectly cut diamond (“diamant exactement taillé”), which leaves us in a state of wonderment (Bazin, “*Sur les routes*” 19). Likening the film to Jean Vigo’s definition of a documented point of view in *A propos de Nice* (1930), Bazin writes in praise of Marker’s specific style of montage once again. He explains that the threefold combination of the images, their relation to one another, and their relation to the commentary lends another dimension to the screen. As Bazin argues, the dialectical connection between commentary and image is crucial to the making and the impact of Marker’s work and he is different from those directors who add a commentary once the image track is complete. Again, Bazin uses a material image to describe the way in which text and visuals interrelate: “le texte vient mordre sur elles comme l’acier de la molette sur le silex pour en arracher la lumière” (ibid). This poetic image suggests that the text bites into the image as one might strike up a cigarette lighter: the generation of ethereal light essential to cinema is dependent on material contact. In a manner that pre-empts his ultimate discussion of Marker’s montage technique, he speaks of the raw material (“matière originelle”) of the work being the idea, which organizes the montage of images, creates the text, and presides over the synthesis of the two.

Finally, a year later, and a month before his death, Bazin refines his praise of montage still further after viewing *Lettre de Sibérie* (1958). This article is the most widely cited and well known in Marker criticism. In the first instance Bazin revisits *Dimanche à Pékin* and explains that in spite of its excellence, it left people hungry for more, since the form of the short film was insufficient for such a vast subject (Bazin, “*Lettre de Sibérie*” 179). The feature length of this subsequent film is more fitting, in Bazin’s view. Bazin orients our attention first to the soundtrack and the intelligence of the commentary, which then leads us to the images. The raw material (“matière première”) is now described as intelligence, its immediate expression the spoken word, and the image is said to come in third place in relation to this verbal intelligence (ibid 180). Bazin coins the term “horizontal montage” to speak of the way in which filmic connections move from ear to eye, creating a new relation to space and time. The aural beauty through which the mind subsequently gains access to the image works in

the reverse direction of traditional montage, which proceeds along the length of the film reel, shot by shot: “Ici, l’image ne renvoie pas à ce qui la précède ou à ce qui la suit, mais latéralement en quelque sorte à ce qui en est dit (ibid).” Adapting his description of a documented point of view in relation to Marker’s preceding film, he now describes this work as “un essai documenté par le film” (ibid). This *essay* is what he has glimpsed from the outset of his comments on Marker’s documentaries of this period, including the collaboration with Resnais.

Throughout the time in which Bazin registered his admiration for Marker’s work, and for the filmmaker’s privileged attention to the very technique of montage that he cautioned against elsewhere, Marker was also writing in addition to making films. It is by attending to a strand of Marker’s written output in these years that we perceive a striking relationship to Bazin’s spiritual beliefs that Marker elsewhere seemed to refute.

### **Marker’s writings**

*Les Cahiers du cinéma* features several articles by Marker during the early 1950s, which range from erudite, although brief, film reviews to more extended pieces on film in Mexico and Hollywood. *Cahiers* was not, however, Marker’s main outlet for his writings and journalism in these years; it was, rather, the journal *Esprit* that published much of his material in the late 1940s and 1950s. Marker’s writings for *Esprit* are numerous and wide-ranging – he published over sixty five articles of varying length – but all fall in line with the left-wing Catholic stance of the journal, and are critical of the abuses of politics and religion across a broad spectrum of issues. Marker turns his attention to film on a number of occasions, devoting detailed articles to works as different as Robert Montgomery’s *The Lady in the Lake* (1947), and Elia Kazan’s *On the Waterfront* (1954). A couple of pieces register the establishment of the IDHEC and one in particular congratulates a student at the Sorbonne, Mlle Poncet, under the tutelage of filmologist Étienne Souriau, for having pursued a thesis on cartoons (although a further article, based on a response from Resnais to the first, questions why Marker omitted Gérald Mc Boing-Boing from his list of additional cartoons to those which Mlle Poncet discussed). In another contribution, he praises the Cinémathèque française and the irreplaceable services that Henri Langlois has done for cinema and audiences alike. And in an article on women students at a high school he is visibly impressed by the sensibilities for cinema that they reveal through a written exercise that asks them to imagine making Corneille’s *Horace* into a film. Within this range of work on film it is, however, in two lengthy articles that the connection between cinema and a spiritual dimension is registered most extensively. While Marker’s and Bazin’s views seemingly divided across the Seine in *Cahiers* on the basis of a tension between religion, politics, and the real, they come much closer in a couple of articles Marker wrote for *Esprit* in the early 1950s. Indeed, Marker writes in praise of the very mysteries that his *Cahiers* piece on German cinema refuses with

good reason, less in support of orthodox religion than in tune with, and wholly open to, the spiritual aspects of the films themselves.

Marker wrote extended meditations on Jean Cocteau's *Orphée* (1950) in 1950 and Carl Theodor Dreyer's *La Passion de Jeanne d'Arc* (1928) in 1952. In his article on *Orphée*, Marker criticizes those who doubt the cinema's capacity for revelation, noting that from mount Sinai to Paramount, the only difference is a change of public. He speaks of a redoubled realism in this film and he talks about the laws of the marvellous world of which Cocteau is the architect. He writes: "Partout cette recherche du concret, du donné, de cette réalité pauvre qui n'est pas substantiellement différente de la réalité des âmes, de la mort, qui lui est proche et étrangère comme l'endroit et l'envers d'un tissu" (Marker, *Orphée* 696). For Marker, Cocteau's film recounts its inner spiritual journey in material terms, explores subjective, interior states through aspects of the physical world, and places us at the meeting point of time and eternity in its bridging of the dimension of myth and the more contemporary setting. Writing at this point in 1950, he states that he sees only one film that is comparable to *Orphée* in the history of cinema – Carl Theodor Dreyer's *Vampyr* (1932) through what he terms its fleshed out metaphysics ("métaphysique incarnée"). Two years later, the rediscovery of a print of Dreyer's *La Passion de Jeanne d'Arc* causes Marker to revise this view (Marker, "La Passion de Jeanne d'Arc").

The revelatory capacity of cinema that Marker indicated in his piece on Cocteau, its ability to probe the soul and to map it onto the flip side of materiality, appears differently in the later piece on Dreyer. Although praising the capacities of panchromatic film for the portrayal of flesh, tears and the glint of Renée Maria Falconetti's eyes, he focuses on the access that this fleshed out vision provides to the soul. He thanks Dreyer the protestant for having given this beauty to one of *our* saints, and says that the drama of the film lies in the journey of a being towards the salvation of their soul, fought out through a cinematographically specific play of space and time. Citing a line from Racine's second preface to *Bajazet*, which will resurface in 1982 as an epigraph to the French version of *Sans Soleil*, Marker notes how the spatial and temporal play of proximity and distance at work between the spectator and characters on screen relates us to a grammar of time. He declares that it is misguided only to see Dreyer's use of close-ups as part of a psychological realist approach, and even more so an exercise in style. Rather, this spatial play in the service of a grammar of time, along with neutral décor and the absence of make-up and elaborate costumes work towards the same goal, which for Marker is to write a film in the present of eternity. Through his vocabulary in these articles, a mystical strand is discernibly entwined with his interests in the plastic or material aspects of film and the image, in addition to his politics. But rather than see these pieces as isolated moments in his writings that appear only as a function of what he is writing on, and the journal he is writing for, this facet of his work survives beyond his writings of the early fifties, couples itself with the passion for montage and the materialism that Bazin sees in Marker's films of this period, and re-emerges at a later date, after

Bazin's death in November 1958.

## Death and Rebirth

It is in Marker's films of 1962 that the quite disparate elements apparent in my discussion thus far come together: the spiritual and the material, the historic-political dimension and the eternal, the Bazinian interest in Bergsonian inspired duration, and the more restless cutting that Bazin comes to reassess in relation to a broader conception of montage praised as unique to Marker's work. Fittingly, 1962 is Marker's preferred starting point for his career, as he has sought to cast his works of the preceding decade as juvenilia unfit for public scrutiny (Marker, "Marker Mémoire" 78). Marker's self-declared date of re-birth is one that I wish to link to the question of resurrection and then to a heightened critical sense of morality as it appears in his films of this year, and relates back to Bazin. Although Bazin's interest in photography is restricted to his famous 1945 essay, Marker's films, as I have argued elsewhere, are closer to a Bazinian than a Deleuzian ontology of cinema through an originary and persistent challenge that they present to the always already moving image (Cooper 1-10). Here I want to pursue the question of how the two films of 1962 inaugurate an opening out of the Bazinian focus on mortality, spirit, and photography in "Ontologie de l'image photographique" – an opening out that is rooted in, but different from, Bazin's spiritual bent. And it is through an interest in duration as much as the stoppage of time that Marker incarnates these very possibilities.

*La Jetée* (1962) famously projects photographs into the movies, but has filmic inter-texts as various as *Battleship Potemkin* (1925), *Vertigo* (1958), and *L'Année dernière à Marienbad* (1961), to name but the most obvious. The material, political, and historical resonance of the photo-roman is apparent from the outset. Marker's filmic debts suggest a combined relation to Soviet montage, along with its blend of politics, history, and revolution; to the Resnais of *Marienbad* whose statuesque poses recall photographic stasis at times; and to Hitchcock, one of many directors, of course, key to the new wave more broadly. The Palais de Chaillot's underground passages form the space for the time-travel experiments of *La Jetée*, their German whispers bringing with them a history of association with occupation and resistance, along with a happier connection to the broader history of the Chaillot site which was later to house the Cinémathèque Française for a time, and to preserve the history of French cinema. Closer to the present, the destruction of Paris actualizes palpable fears of the Cuban missile crisis. *La Jetée*'s almost exclusive use of photographs, its opening focus on the life of the child and his death as a man, align form and subject-matter, with a concern with mortal fragility that runs throughout Marker's work. But this photo-roman clings to spiritual in addition to physical life.

The choral music that plays intermittently throughout the film is provided by the choir of the Russian Cathedral of Paris and sets a poignant minor key from the opening sequence onwards. The choir sings

Piotr Goncharov's "Krestu Tvoyemu" (Tropaire en l'honneur de la Sainte Croix/Troparion to the Holy Cross): "Before Thy Cross we bow down in veneration, O our Master, and Thy holy Resurrection we glorify". Thus they introduce echoes of the crucifixion that will linger throughout, even as the soundtrack diversifies. Coupled with this, we are told by the commentary that "[s]e réveiller dans un autre temps, c'était naître une seconde fois – adulte." As I have argued elsewhere, the difficulty of being reborn as a man exchanges the miracle of religion for that of science: resurrection – that of Lazarus or Christ – is rewritten as re-birth through time travel (Cooper 50). However, while Marker's time travel secularizes the miraculous possibilities of the man's re-birth, subsequent death, and looped temporal structure of eternal return, it never entirely loses a connection to the spiritual dimension, and this echoes through to the Russian choral music that accompanies his death at the end.

*La Jetée*'s sister film of 1962, released in 1963, remains on the surface of Paris, rather than plunging into its subterranean depths. *Le Joli Mai* was co-directed with Pierre Lhomme in May 1962, the first May after the signing of the Evian accords to end the Algerian war. The memory of the war haunts the present time of filming (as indeed it does in *La Jetée* in experiments akin to torture) and this memory emerges in the film as part of the unconscious of everyday life that its interrogative style seeks to bring out. Indebted to changes in camera technology as well as the emergence of *cinéma vérité* and direct cinema, the crew takes to the streets to interview people to ask them about their hopes and dreams, their awareness of socio-political events, and their relations to other people. With only a few exceptions, *Le Joli Mai* shows how unknowing or uncaring these individuals are about what lies beyond their own immediate concerns, and how easily they position themselves as the point of origin for the unfolding of time, memory, and history without thinking of others. Occasionally, though, thinking of others also emerges as a possible problem when it leads to self-effacement, and *Le Joli Mai* strives for a rather utopian balance between thinking too much about others and not enough.

The film clearly marks its awareness of its place in recent French cinematic history. For Jean-Luc Alpigiano, Marker's work is closest to that of Jean Rouch at this point in his career (Alpigiano 27). Gesturing back to *Chronique d'un été* (1960), there are cameo appearances from Morin and Rouch, but Resnais and Varda also appear fleetingly, as do Godard and Rivette. Of the many people that they interview, there are some who are taken very seriously indeed: victims of prejudice and colonial oppression, notably a black African student and a young Algerian man, but also a priest who converted to communism. As is suggested by the seriousness with which this latter man's testimony is treated, the film does not uphold a belief in the institution of the church, and listens attentively to his communist conversion, but it does also build contrastingly on the connection to the spiritual resonance of *La Jetée*. Through grounded observation and by listening to the people it interviews, the film is rooted in a connection to the real that respects the time-space continuum of many of its encounters in addition to intermingling some faster paced montage, photographic stills, and time-lapse



cinematography towards the end. For the first time since its brief appearance in *Cuba Si!* (1961) Marker uses direct footage of people talking. Even when the synchronous relation between the person talking (or singing) and their image is disrupted by cuts to other images or a smoother transition to another sequence, continuity of their story is respected by preserving their voice over the different images. Regardless of what the various figures say, they are filmed at length – usually in a long take or sequence shot. Thus, quite different from the ceaseless restlessness of montage cutting, and the succession of photographs in *La Jetée*, linked by straight cuts and dissolves, the duration of the scenes we witness is valorized. In this, a Bazinian resonance becomes apparent, albeit distinct from *La Jetée*'s exploration of a secularized resurrection of one man in time.

We shift in *Le Joli Mai* from a concern with mortality and spiritual survival, to morality, as a different kind of resurrection takes place here through film – one that is founded in its encounters and in its critical drive towards altruism. To an extent, such a view is partially discernible in the Bazinian sense that aesthetic choices betray a worldview that is moral, spiritual, or phenomenological. It is also apparent in Godard's observation, when talking about *Hiroshima mon amour* in 1959, that tracking shots are a moral affair (Godard et al 5). Yet Marker goes further than both positions, by connecting with duration to offer a filmic articulation of a series of encounters here that re-cast a relation to the spirit of Bazin's ontology. While still questioning what film is and what it can do, these encounters relocate the response in interrogative moral terms, through relations to others, rather than focusing on the more solitary death and spiritual rebirth of *La Jetée*'s contention with mortality.

After these two films of 1962 based in Paris, Marker's subsequent film, *Le Mystère Koumiko* (1965), takes us to Tokyo and pays playful homage to the new wave. Marker the montage ace and militant may generally be more widely discussed than Marker the metaphysician, but these varied aspects of this director owe a great deal to tacit and explicit dialogues between his work and that of Bazin. Eschewing a complete embrace of orthodox religion, but preserving the fascination of some of its mystical moments, Marker's preferred starting point for the rest of his career is one in which the material and the spiritual, mortality and morality collide in highly generative ways. Marker's regeneration through the new wave posits this period as pivotal to the future directions that he will take, and his Bazinian-inspired concerns live on throughout his œuvre, without ever fully containing or constraining his own protean spirit.

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## Statues Also Die - But Their Death is not the Final Word

Author: Matthias De Groof

**Abstract (E):** Along with people like Césaire, Sartre and Howlett, Chris Marker cherished in 1953 the hope that African artefacts would be removed from the museum. In the film *Les Statues meurent aussi* ('Statues Also Die' 1950-53) Marker as director and writer, accompanied by Resnais as co-director, Ghislain Cloquet as cameraman and Guy Bernard as composer, took up the mission to challenge the prevailing gaze on African artefacts. How does Marker's *Les Statues meurent aussi* look upon African art?

**Abstract (F):** À l'instar de personnes comme Césaire, Sartre et Howlett, Chris Marker cultiva l'espoir en 1953 que les artefacts africains puissent sortir du strict cadre des musées. Dans le film *Les Statues meurent aussi* (1950-53), Marker, en tant que réalisateur et scénariste, secondé par Resnais, comme co-réalisateur, Ghislain Cloquet comme directeur de la photographie et Guy Bernard comme compositeur, se donna pour mission de contester le regard figé prédominant sur les artefacts africains. Quel regard porte sur l'art africain *Les statues meurent aussi* de Marker ?

**keywords:** Marker, Sartre, Mudimbe, Senghor, Cheick Anta Diop, Vautier, Resnais, Malraux, Benjamin, Aminata Traoré, Madeleine Rousseau, Présence Africaine, African contemporary art, African traditional art, mask, statue, universality-particularity, humanism, resistance, ethnologization, aestheticization, museologization, museum, Musée de l'Homme, Quai Branly.

### *Article*

#### **Museologization, ethnologization, aestheticization**

*The Museum gives us a false consciousness, a thief's conscience.  
We occasionally sense that these works were not intended to  
end up between these bare walls for the pleasure of Sunday  
strollers, for children on their free afternoon from school,  
or for Monday intellectuals. We sense vaguely that something  
has been lost and that these gatherings of old maids, this silence  
of the grave, and the respect of pygmies do not constitute the  
true milieu of art. (Merleau-Ponty 1973:72)*

'[Présence Africaine] asked us for a film on black African art. Chris Marker and I have started our reflection with the following question: *why the black African art is located in the Musée de l'Homme*,

*whereas the Greek or Egyptian is in the Louvre?*’ This incentive question which Resnais formulates in an interview to René Vautier (1972:33) can be preceded by a preliminary question: *why in a museum at all?* The museum as a public institute in the modern era constitutes an important symbol of historical progression. Putting our artefacts at a distance, in buildings behind vitrines and transformed as commodities, makes our past tangible and visible as history. ‘A civilization leaves behind itself its mutilated traces like the pebbles dropped by Tom Thumb’. [*Image of a decapitated bust.*] (Quoted from voice-over in *Les statues* – “vo” from now on – which is spoken by Jean Négroni as the narrator and translated in English by the author.) Referring to these traces concretises evolution. When *les statues meurent*, they are put in shrines called museums.

When men are dead, they enter into History. When statues are death, they enter into art. This botany of death is what we call culture. [...] An object is death when the living glance trained upon it has disappeared [*images of heads without busts looking away*]. And when we disappear, our objects will be confined to the place where we send those of the blacks, to the museum (vo). [*Images of heads without bust looking straight to the spectator.*] [...] And then they die, in their turn. Classified, labelled, conserved in the ice of showcases and collections, they enter into the history of art (vo).

‘Those [objects] of the blacks.’ Weren’t they dead? Are they art after all? The eagerness to exhibit non-western artefacts, particularly around the last turn of the century of the past millennium, feeds the same modernistic *Weltanschauung* as the one carried out by the museum *tout court*: constructing primitivism to which western civilization can refer as a variation of western past existing in the present. The invention of the remote as past reinforces the idea of the west as developed. This idea of “knowledge of time” (Fabian 1983) constitutes, according to Volney (1830), an Archimedic point from which the present evolves that would be hopeless otherwise. “La violence irruptive du Temps” (Foucault 1973:132) makes from “the rest of the west” the relics of our own past. *Africa became our museum*. This shrine of the pre-modern was also ‘a nostalgic response to the loss of a common history’ (De Boeck 1996:144). The 19<sup>th</sup> century is *à la recherche du temps perdu* and finds in this “lost time” a satisfaction, liberation and fulfilment of its project. ‘The modern navigators only have one objective when they describe the customs of new peoples: to complete the history of man’ (La Pérouse 1930). Museums domesticate time. ‘Evolution, conquest and difference become signs of a theological, biological and anthropological destiny, and assign to things and beings both their natural slots and social mission’ (Mudimbe 1988:17). Unilinear evolutionism of the 19<sup>th</sup> century – a model that considered western civilization as its culmination point – produced in the first half of 20<sup>th</sup> century the idea that traditional civilizations which were considered to represent our past and not to emancipate themselves from their primitive stadium, were static and without history (Davidson 1999, Mudimbe 1992). *Africa became our eternal museum*.

We can now proceed questioning the second part of the motive that stimulated both directors in their creation: ‘*why in Musée de l’Homme, whereas the Greek or Egyptian is in the Louvre?*’ This question was already posed in 1920 by the “Bulletin de la vie artistique”: ‘*les Arts lointains iront-ils au Louvre?*’ The western museologization or museification of exotic artefacts from our *contemporary ancestors* (Adolf Bastian) was in that time not achieved in an art-museum like the Louvre, but in ethnographic museums like the *Musée de l’Homme* which is dependent on the national museum of natural history. Mudimbe elucidates: ‘[African artefacts] seem to be remnants [...] of absolute beginnings (1994:64). The ethnographic museum enterprise espoused a historical orientation, deepening the need for the memory of an archaic European civilization and, consequently, expounding reasons for decoding exotic and primitive objects as symbolic and contemporary signs of a Western antiquity’ (1994:61). The *ethnologization* of artefacts fits once again in the politics of putting at a distance: a categorization of otherness in order to define the self. Whereas museologization is a western stance that deals with alterity in time as history, ethnologization deals with it in space as distance (cf. Mudimbe 2008, Lévy-Strauss 1963: introduction). The combination of ‘ethnographic’ and ‘museum’ that assimilates African artefacts which are still attached to living people, points at the putting into the past of the distant. The imagery that museologization and ethnologization produces, appropriates the other as something primitive, barbarous or exotic. ‘Black art! We look at it as if it has its *raison d’être* in the pleasure it gives us. The intentions of the black who created it, the emotions of the black who looks at it, all of that escapes us’ (vo).

Parallel to the alienation by ethnologization – but half a century after the achievement of the film – artefacts got classified again by the museum when brought under the minimal denominator of “art”, ‘a notion contested by their origins’ (Guermann 2006:23). Without the need to evoke the discussion whether the attribution of aesthetic qualities to (African) worked objects implies that they are considered artistic (Cf. Galaverna 2002:5-9; Goodman 1996:59; Poissant 1994:9-10; Kant 1878; Schaeffer 1996), we can perceive the appropriation of artefacts as art, in museums like Quai Branly. A third part of the incentive question could thus only be added now: *why in Quai Branly?* What does this re-apprehension of a lost past mean? By the recognition of (projected) aesthetic qualities on them, African artefacts are degraded from the cultural to the cultural. Aestheticization buried them again (not even in Africa) as a false attempt to repair the “assassination” by ethnologization (cf. declarations of Aminata Traoré concerning Quai Branly on the net). ‘S’attacher à la seule forme, c’est considérer uniquement l’écorce, or celle-ci meurt, dès qu’elle est séparée de la sève qui la fait vivre’ (Porcile 1965:137). The museum’s “promotion” of “primitive” artefacts as art – in a period when primitivism as artistic trend was fully recognized – did not mean a revolution in the history of art if we consider its science as concerned with its own culture and historical space (Mudimbe 1994:61). History of Art promotes itself as a technique capable of analyzing and valuing its objects from within an artistic

tradition, relates to non western productions on an analogical basis, according to Goldwater (1986) and recuperates different aesthetics in its own history. Tied up with the museum's ethnologization, its aestheticization assimilates objects into its own grid. 'Viewers may now appreciate the formal properties of these objects, be attentive to their textures and shapes [...] and may even see how they prefigure and correspond to examples of modernist European sculpture and design. But have they come to life?' (König 2007; see also Price 1989). What Malraux described in *Les voix du silence* as a modern annexation of works from all times and all civilizations by the art world (*le musée imaginaire*) in order to give them the status of works of art, is further disputed by *Les statues* for this annexation being a form of ethnocentrism or even ethnocide. According to Marker – whose film was only published two years after Malraux' *Les voix du silence* – the annexation by the art scene does not, as Malraux considers, constitute a resurrection within the space of the museum, but a deadly recuperation (Zarader 2008).

Besides their dealing with their incentive question by bringing the camera inside the museum, the directors found an utmost manifestation of the museum's ethnologizing and aestheticizing gaze outside of the museum. The de-cultuating gaze is exemplified by Marker through his depiction of tourist art, defined by Jules-Rosette as 'art produced locally for consumption by outsiders' (1984:9). While images show a white man teaching Africans how to make their own objects with new tools, the voice-over states that '[...] black art becomes a dead language and what is born on his steps is the jargon of decadence. Its religious requirements are followed by commercial requirements. And given that the white is the buyer, given that demand outstrips supply, given that it is necessary to go fast, black art becomes indigenous handcraft. Ever more degraded replicas of the beautiful pictures invented by African culture are fabricated. Here, the village is vulgarized, the technique is impoverished. In the country where every form had its signification, where the gracefulness of a curve was a declaration of love to the world, one becomes accustomed to an art of bazaar' (vo). While abstract primitivism was in fashion in Europe, colonizers not only degraded traditional art into knickknacks and airport-art, but taught colonised representational art and art of portraits. 'Henceforth incapable of expressing the essential, the sculptor seeks after resemblance. We taught him not to carve farther than the tip of his nose' (vo). Tourist art is thus in total continuation of the western exhibitions which according to Benjamin 'created a framework in which [the] use-value receded into the background [...] and which glorified the exchange value of commodities' (1976:165, quoted in Arnaut 2009). Mudimbe closes: 'African tourist art and its contradictions [...] are just an *ad vallem* consequence of the process which [...] classified African artefacts according to the grid of Western thought and imagination, in which alterity is a negative category of the Same' (1988:12).



## Marker's attempt to rehabilitate "African art"

*The whites already projected onto the blacks their own demons  
as a way to purge themselves of them. (vo)*

*Les Statues* sheds a critical light on the ethno- & historiocentric western gaze. The film takes the dispossession and transformations of African artefacts as a heuristic model in order to understand the greater dynamics of the colonial gaze. This begins already in how the film depicts the museum after its opening on a dark screen. The first vitrines that the spectator sees after having identified with the position of the museum-goer, exhibits daily objects like a knife, stamp and broken umbrella. This detachedness, which refers to *Neue Sachlichkeit*, is complemented with surrealist configurations as could be seen in surrealists expositions of the thirties (fig.1). In *Les Statues*, surrealist and arbitrary categorization is emphasised by means of little cards depicting objects behind the vitrines, as for instance "utilitarian art" and "unknown origin". This ironic composition functions as a mirror deconstructing our subjective way of attributing meaning to otherness – *in casu* African artefacts – when applied to the Self.



Fig. 1: Exposition surréaliste de la Galerie Charles Ratton à Paris en 1936. (Courtesy of Toma Luntumbue Muteba)

This mirroring points at Marker's cinematographic strategy which is one of implication rather than communication (Odin, 1998:39). The *prise de conscience*, which is the aim of the strategy of implication, is continued in the shot right after the one of the vitrines. Now from the point of view of the African statue, we see gazes of curiosity, disdain and appreciation, but all of which we get a feeling of voyeurism. The subjectivity assigned to an African statue in a display case by attributing it a point of view is worked out by a jump cut to an animating gaze of a black woman museum visitor meeting the African statue. 'The contention that statues die once they are entombed in museums, no longer looked at as part of a living culture, is imaginatively reversed' (Lupton 2005:37).

The spectator's gaze is further altered as he becomes a traveller into a voyage, 'to a country where one goes by losing one's memory' (vo). When he, the traveller-spectator, leaves European shrines of African statues deprived from their cultural context and assimilated through museologization, he is firstly brought in touch with different maps of Africa. The variety of maps depicting each in a different way the very same continent does not only show the relativity of all representation and hence the historicity of them (and also of the film). It also gives back what Africa is deprived of; namely history. To counter the idea in which – according to for instance Hegel in his *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Geschichte* – Africa is a continent without history (1970:120), *Les Statues* gives a graphic insight of Africa's evolution by showing its shape on the map slowly unravelling through the 11<sup>th</sup>, 12<sup>th</sup>, 15<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century. This all proceeds from a map depicting Africa as 'the fetus of the world' (vo) or 'le nombril du monde' as Sartre puts it (1948:584), the origin of the homo sapiens and *archè* of culture, which constitutes a 'common ground' for humanism to which Marker refers at the dénouement of the film. Marker is not alone in this quest for a 'common ground', which gave birth to several controversial studies on African source of universal culture. (Diop 1974; Nwokeji & Eltis 2002; Coon 1939; Snowden 1970; Evangeliou 1994; Onyewuenyi 1993) These quests of e.g. Cheick Anta Diop, do not only counter western representation in which Africa is denied of history, reason and values, but tries to offer the necessary commensurability that allows Marker's statement of similarity and equality towards the end of the film.

The travelogue continues after the spectator has been prepared by the maps of the continent. He is led through the relentlessness of untouched African desert and the heart of darkness in the jungle. However, this confirmation of European imagery is only set in order to reach its opposite: the revealing of African civilization. 'Once beyond deserts and forests, which he believed to be bordering on the kingdom of Satan, the traveller discovered nations, palaces' (vo). Although only constituting a belated and fictive gesture, it is from this moment on that the liveliness of the Negro-statues is re-established. A renaissance occurs thanks to the intelligent use of text and images. 'The film magically resurrects African art, using a fluid repertoire of zooms, pans and sharp cuts to show objects liberated

from their display case coffins and infused with life and movement' (Lupton 2005:37). The use of the "dispositif cinématographique" receives its full pertinence by its ability to imagine the 'wreckages' of African culture as a part of a whole from which those artefacts were torn, and its ability to attribute a narration to this whole, a time, a history. The editing links together isolated statues, thus giving the static objects a dynamic narrative force. Travel-shots between two statues of sphinxes evoke palaces and nations; nations are glorified by symmetrical images suggesting harmony; an icon of the bird suggests freedom; gifts generosity, static soldiers sovereignty; a scarified princess beauty; variety of musicians art. Solidarity and unity are suggested as well.

In these images, Marker does not show palaces ruined by conquest or nations enslaved by colonialism, but chooses for the imaginative in order to reanimate what was assassinated. His reanimation does not bring into focus the mutilation by museums. In stead, he reanimates – cinematographically – neglected and unknown memory, well knowing he cannot replace the statues in their natural context anymore. The travel-shots between two statues of sphinxes for instance, do not evoke the decline of Egyptian civilisation. On the contrary, this analogy between Negro-art and Egyptian culture evoked by this scene refers to Cheick Anta Diop's thesis in which he argued that ancient Egypt had been a Black African culture. Diop submitted his thesis at the University of Paris, the same period as the outset of *Les statues*. Parallel to the censorship of the film, the thesis was rejected. However, in 1955, the thesis was published as *Nations nègres et culture* (*Negro Nations and Culture*). Présence Africaine, the patron of *Les statues*, published several of his books.

Because cinema is unable to restore the original gaze on African artefacts, it is said that the film becomes complicit to what it denounces. The film does not render the artefacts visible through their proper ontology but they remain mute. 'It could be said, says König, that in Resnais' film, we can't really see these objects or these people at all: we see chalice not cup, souvenir not prayer, portrait not death. [...] Acknowledging the statue's invisibility to us may make us feel better about our looking. But unfortunately, this gesture doesn't really allow the statue any more life than seeing it as a souvenir does [...]' (2007). Alter ties up with König. She asserts that 'Cinema, by its very nature, participates in [the process of mummification or transformation of everyday life into culture] by documenting and recording events, people, objects, the past, and the present and freezing them in a two-dimensional audiovisual verisimilitude' (Alter 2006:59). She evokes a similitude between museification and mortification processes of cinema, even when cinema tries to imbue inanimate objects with life. 'Should we perhaps not even view this film?' König asks herself. The film answers negatively. Alter asserts: 'Marker's films excel in calling attention to their own artifice and thereby encourage a self-reflexive questioning of what happens when life becomes celluloid' (2006:59). König continues: 'protest [...] ought not to take the form of a [...] voluntary perceptual disengagement from the world.'

‘Like the death mask, the film is not a screen to hide behind, but an object which renders visible death’s proximity, our complicity with and connectedness to it’ (2007).

In my reading of *Les Statues*, the film does not aim at evoking the original experience of African artefacts. My interpretation is thus opposite to Porcille’s assumption that the intentions of the filmmakers were to ‘replace the elements in the natural context’ (1965:137). Even if their intention would be the removal of statues from the museum, they considered them as uprooted in such a way that they could only rely on reanimation and not on a natural context. The removal from the museum is thus its replacement in the imaginative order of cinema or its metamorphosis in other forms of art (cf. infra). In the same line as Porcille, Zarader opposes Marker to Malraux, suggesting that *Les statues* feeds itself with a nostalgia for a living gaze on the artefacts in their natural context whereas Malraux contests in his *Le Musée imaginaire* the possibility to arouse this gaze again (2007:1-5). On the contrary, a modified gaze on African “art” and its power to adapt according to changing post- and neo-colonial contexts (cf. infra) are prefigured and put in practice by *Les statues* itself, by its re-imagination and reinvention of African art. *Les Statues* is strikingly close to the word *reprendre*, intended by Mudimbe (1994:154-208) as an image of the contemporary activity of African art that ‘takes up an interrupted tradition, not out of a desire for purity [...] but in a way that reflects the conditions of today’ (1994:154). The film is not satisfied with vainly trying to reproduce traditional meaning, but makes an attempt to project African art into the future. Contrary to what Zarader ascribes to the film, *Les Statues* does not content itself with empathy. This means that Marker is closer to Malraux, who thinks that the refusal of empathy grounds the possibility of metamorphosis, and to Benjamin, who thinks that the refusal of empathy grounds the possibility of redemption. In the last part of this contribution we will see that *Les Statues* attributes to the metamorphosis of African art a possibility of redemption.

In sharp tension with the images that construct ‘palaces and nations’ by means of cinematographic suggestion, Marker evokes through the voice-over colonial destruction of these palaces and nations; and of African art.

These great empires are now the deadest kingdoms of history. Contemporaries of Saint Louis, of Joan of Arc, they are more unknown to us than Sumer and Babylon. In the last century, the flames of conquerors turned this whole past into an absolute enigma. Black upon black, black battles in the night of time, the sinking has left us only with this beautiful striped wreckage which we interrogate. (vo)

[That] which gave sense and form to black art dissolves and disappears. It is the white who pretends to take on the role of the ancestors. The true statue for protection, exorcism and fecundity henceforth is his silhouette. Everything unites against black art. Caught in a pass

between Islam, enemy of the images, and Christianity, which burns idols, African culture collapses. [...] Temporal powers practice the same austerity. Everything that was a pretext for works of art is replaced. (vo)

But Marker is not satisfied with the commemoration of death, since the wreckages of cultural tradition constitute affirmative signs of evangelization and progression that colonialism brought to the developing world. The museum is a sign of the success of the *mission civilisatrice*. Death reaffirms the colonial stance of putting at a distance. It neglects new manifestations of African art and their possibilities of interaction or deconstruction. After showing us our familiarity with African figures, he states: 'But this brotherhood in death is not enough for us. It is much closer to us that we are going to find the true black art, that which puzzles us' (vo). It is about art which bewilders and confuses. Which art? Marker does not give the spectator a didactical explanation of African art in ethnographical categories nor aesthetic characteristics. Instead, he sheds a light on its ontological status (1) and its political power of resistance against racism and colonialism (2).

### **(1) What is African art outside of museums?**

*L'âme nègre doit sortir des musées (Howlett). Il faut qu'il retaille ce vêtement tout fait. La négritude est retrouvée (Sartre 1947).*

Ethnographic museums appropriated African artefacts in order to assimilate them in a play of otherness and sameness, so that they speak to us as our contemporary history. The art museum assigns them aesthetic qualities, so that they speak to us as art. Marker for his part attributes them (not in form but in content) a "difference" which refuses to be reduced to a western gaze. Seemingly opposite to epistemological ethnocentrism and cultural eurocentrism that assigns meaning to everything from within its own conceptions, Marker attributes them alterity, despite the recognition of form: they look at us, but with void eyes.

These images ignore us [...] they are from another world [...] we have nothing to do in this gathering of ancestors who are not our ancestors. We want to see suffering, serenity, humor, when we know nothing. Colonizers of the world, we want everything to speak to us: the beast, the dead, the statues. And these statues are mute. They have mouths and don't speak. They have eyes and don't see us. (vo)

Nevertheless, Marker attributes meaning to them, inspired by Madeleine Rousseau (who is for her part inspired by Placide Tempels) amongst other critics of African art who figure in the opening credits of the film. His conception of African art is accompanied by a Sartrean conception of the human (Rousseau 1948:38). Marker actually states that African art outside the museum 'is the sign of a lost unity where art was the guarantee of an agreement between man and world' (vo). Meanings attributed to African artefacts in *Les Statues* can be seen as manifestations of the legacy of the negritude

movement, developed by Césaire, Senghor and Damas and with Sartre and *Présence Africaine* – the commissioner of the film – as its pre-eminent voices in France. According to Sartre’s interpretation of the idea expressed by the movement, the ultimate function of *l’art nègre* is to manifest *l’âme noire* (1948:524). Negritude is defined by Senghor as ‘the totality of cultural values of the black world’ (1959). Since they celebrate presence in reality and resist disenchantment, its manifestations represent ‘Being’: ‘L’être est noir’, states Sartre (1948:579). The African conception of “art” – which, according to *Les Statues*, figures in reality and daily life – is distinct from a common western conception of art in which art has its place outside daily life. Whereas the ‘value of the [western] artwork lies in its ability to solicit different kind of looking from its viewers’ (König, 2007) enhanced by a spatial distinction by e.g. the museum; African “art” is not separated from the world. Whereas a separation ‘allows [western art] to exist as an object of attentive perception’ (König, 2007); African art belongs to a cosmology of unity. More radically, Lupton asserts that ‘the film suggests that the Western reverence for art as a sphere separate from everyday life is a reflex designed to conceal the fact and the consequences of the death [of statues] (2005:38).

It is not very useful for us to call it “religious object” in a world where everything is religion, nor “artistic object” in a world where everything is art. Art here begins in the spoon and ends up in the statue. And it is the same art. [...] Hence, every object is sacred because every creation is sacred. It recalls the creation of the world and continues it. [...] This is the world of rigour; each thing has its place within it. [...] One realizes that this creation has no limits, that everything communicates. [...] Here, man is never separated from the world, the same strength nourishes every fibre. Those fibres, among which the most sacrilegious man, while lifting the Earth’s skirt, has discovered... ..death. (vo)

*L’âme nègre* evokes invisibility while standing in the presence of reality. Both are not mutually exclusive: ‘The black statue is not the God, it is the prayer’ (vo). The mask also takes as object an important role in these semantics. The mask refers in its transparency to the invisible and fights against death. ‘It unveils what it wants to hide’ (vo). African statues and masks stand thus in relation to death: ‘they keep death at bay by bringing it closer’ (König 2007). They are no symbols of death but the celebration of it as the roots of life. ‘These roots flourish’ (vo). Death thrives. Statues and masks are not the memory of what was once living, but they negotiate life. The relation that African art has with death is a form of negotiation and is contrary to what Porcille states as an inability of African art of abstraction (1965:136).

Guardians of graves, sentinels of dead people, watchdogs of the invisible, these ancestors’ statues are not made for the cemetery. We put stones over our dead in order to prevent them from escaping. The black keeps them nearby to honour them and benefit from their power. [...] They are the roots of the living. And their eternal countenance takes, sometimes, the shape of a root. [...] These masks fight against death. [...] Because the familiarity with the

dead leads to the domestication of death [...], to the transmission of death, to the charming of death. [...] Prayer [...] connects earth to death, by means of shape and by means of matter. [...] [When death is given, the vital strength which is now freed] wanders. It will torment the living until it has taken on its former appearance. It is to this appearance that the blood of sacrifice is addressed. And it is this appearance that is fixed in these legendary metamorphoses in order to appease it until these winning faces are done repairing the fabric of the world. (vo)

## **(2) Political resistance**

It is from its resistance to be appropriated within Sameness and its participation in history, that death does not have the final word on African art. It is from their relation to death, turning against destiny by their creation and testifying of the eternal struggle of human beings against Appearance and Time, that African manifestations of *l'âme noire* can become subversive. It is from their particularity and difference, participating in the universal without being deduced out of it, that statues are metamorphosed.

Sometimes, one says "no"! It is the black artist who says it. Then a new form of art shows up: the art of fighting. Art of transition for a period of transition. Art of the present time, between a lost grandeur and another to conquer. Art of the provisional, whose ambition is not to last, but to witness. [...Racism] drives the black artist into a new metamorphosis and, in the ring, or in an orchestra; his role consists in giving back the blows that his brother receives in the street. (vo)

The juxtaposition of images of art (which Marker rediscovers in the movements of a black athlete or the rhythms of a jazz drummer) with images of severe colonial exploitation (and instrumentalization of the African body), shows powerfully the fight of art against destiny, the resistance against mutilation of culture. The juxtaposition in the editing is transcended when the persistence of art is shown *within* the images of exploitation, together in one shot. Opposition culminates in deconstruction of archive images used in *Les Statues* depicting slavery and meant to demonstrate colonial achievements and western pride. The voice-over points at the dignity of blacks that figure in the images which *condition sine qua non* were exactly the denial of their dignity. The contradiction within the same image calls for the recognition of equality, which is prefigured in the workers' insurrection wherein blacks take part.

‘There would be nothing to prevent us from being together the inheritors of two pasts, if that equality could be refound in the present. At least it is prefigured by the only equality that is denied to no one ... that of repression’ (vo).

In repression, race struggle becomes class struggle. In the factories, the will to grasp the world that gave birth to African art is now transformed as the ability to appropriate means of production. ‘It is

always against death that one fights' (vo). *Les Statues* shows resemblances between industrial progression and African ritual activity. Marker does not denounce the modernization of Africa as Jean d'Yvoire puts it (1991:25), but sees in it possible means against alienation since it occurs from within African identity. It is not a matter of death of a civilization, as Porcille wants to put it (1965:136) but a civilization in evolution. The appropriation of the image by a black photographer, and thus the right of a proper worldview, is said to be a heritage of the sorcerer who captures images with his mirror and whose act counters the alienation of representations imposed upon them.

## **Denouement**

Their history might be an enigma, but their shapes are not foreign to us. After the Frisians, the monsters, the helmeted Atrides of Benin, all the vestments of Greece over a people of a sect, here are their Apollos from Aifé, which strike us with a familiar language. And it is fair that the black feel pride about a civilization which is as old as ours. Our ancestors can look at each other face-to-face without looking down with empty eyes. [...] There is no rupture between African civilization and ours. Faces of black art fell off from the same human face, like snake's skin. Beyond their dead forms, we recognize this promise, common to all the great cultures, of a man who is victorious over the world. And, white or black, our future is made of this promise. (vo)

The common fight against destiny which is not bound to any culture, and the 'common ground' of history are united in the theme of the African art, which was the original brief by *Présence Africaine* and which evoked the rhetorical question by Resnais and Marker: 'Would there be an art made by primitive populations and another art made by evolved populations, two arts with a total different essence?' (Vautier 1972:34). The resemblance in form between African sculptures and masks and the human, function as the metaphor for universal ground amongst all cultures and brotherhood. The universality being the recognition of particularity gives to the issue of African statues a resonance on a human scale. The denouement constitutes the most anti-colonial statement of the film, as the denial of the rupture between two civilizations signifies the refusal of the fundament of colonial legitimation.

Madeleine Rousseau writes that 'the real encounter with Africa is firstly made through forms' (1994:37). One could suggest that the resemblance in form on which *Les Statues* focuses towards the end of the film and which would imply an encounter between Europe and Africa is yet another projection of sameness on difference and appropriation of otherness to the self. This would mean that the "promise" of African art is inscribed in the grid of western conceptions. However, this position confuses the artefact and its shape. Markers visual recognition of a form only points at resemblance – how culturally different its genesis might be. It is this recognition of particularity, which can be the sole possible universality.



## Conclusion

*J'ai regardé le film et je dois dire que je ne me suis même pas posé la question que c'est un film qui avait été fait en 1952. Pour moi, c'est un film d'actualité. C'est un film que je dirais d'avant-garde, c'est-à-dire, qui se projette dans le temps. [...] Moi je ne le connaissais pas avant, mais ça m'a fait un énorme plaisir, parce que au moins, ça m'a effacé une image du cinéma africain fait par les Européens. (Souleymane Cissé, in Imbert 2007 :71)*

Marker counters the western conception of traditional objects, and substitutes its alterity by another in the first part of the film: he takes them as a manifestation of a different conception of art than ours. Their different ontology implies that their displacement into the museum did not bring them closer to us but paradoxically put them on a distance, deprived of their essence. They are 'stripped of their spiritual functions by being designated as "spiritual"', says König (2007). The 'living gaze' upon them that disappeared is indeed the one of the society in which the artefact had its place. Despite the difference of conception, these manifestations are said in the last part of the film to be recognizable to ours. The similarity in form is symbolised in the shape of the human face, bearing in it a moral appeal. This evolution of the film in which the postulation of a difference that cannot be recuperated and assimilated slides into a discourse of similarity and equality in which the acceptance is formulated of a common fate (Foucault 1984:70) seems remarkably concordant to the evolution of African thought from the movement of negritude of the thirties (in which the same antithetical difference is emphasised) towards the movement of for instance Cheick Anta Diop (in which a common process is proposed from which the western culture arose and which primarily confirms resemblance).

This movement is more specifically present in the fate that the film assigns to African art. The motive of the first part evokes the degradation from the cultural to the cultural and ultimately the 'death' of African statues by the museum whose only function is to 'remain witness to a "primitive" past' (Mudimbe 1994:61). The reasons for museologization were thus reflexive: as self-definition. In this sense, African artefacts were not marginal, but essential for the centre (Copans 1992, De Boeck 1996:145). For Mudimbe, this affirmation of otherness constitutes the negativity of a dialectics: the appropriation by the museum converts otherness to the self and to the imagination of the West. This is why *Les Statues* tries in the first part of the film to affirm and recognize the value of African artefacts *outside* of the museum or western imagination. One could make the reproach of for instance Geurmann (2006:24) that *Les Statues* only reverses colonial normative hierarchy by its simplistic esteem of African objects and caricatures of "the good black versus the bad white". By inverting colonial values the film would reproduce them without putting them at stake. However, the promise of

equality propagated towards the finishing of the film leads us once again to the dynamics of the film from recognition of black art and African values to a broader humanism. Within the legacy of the movement of negritude – and not, as Alter claims, ‘in sharp contrast with the popular appeal of negritude’ (2006:60) – *Les Statues* revalue what has been negated in order to claim its place in the universal. Bearing in mind that death of an object is understood by Marker as the disappearance of ‘the living gaze trained upon it’ (vo), his ultimately positive cinematographic restoration by means of a – irrevocably modified and renewed – gaze on artefacts are to be understood as a necessary phase of recognition without which there would be no valid criticism after all. Moreover, stating that such revaluation is simply a reversal of western hierarchy and is consequently tributary to western paradigm still reproduces the dualistic opposition of the other to the self, and remains thus in the mentioned paradigm.

However, besides this important revaluation, *Les Statues* evokes in its last part a turning point which procures the film a total different dialectic than a recuperating one – which is then rectified. The dialectic is now a liberating one that goes ‘from silence to promise’ (Payot 2009), wherein death has a constitutive function. Art – and precisely the one that stands in relation to, and resists death – transforms itself, as the film shows. The idea of African art propagated by *Les Statues* is also one of transformation, but now one in which art emerges out of its carcass to manifest itself in deconstructive forms. *Les Statues* thus goes further than suggested in Lupton’s description of the film, according to which it gives an ‘insight into the damaging cultural impact of colonialism and the consequences of imposing a white imperial gaze upon African art and culture’ (2005:36). *Les Statues* rather renders an account of Ulli Beiers conclusion. ‘It is no longer possible to look at African art and see nothing but a continuous and rapid process of disintegration. We can now see that African art has responded to the social and political upheavals that have taken place all over the continent. The African artist has refused to be fossilized’ (1968:14). Mudimbe writes: ‘This discontinuity, despite its violence, doesn’t necessarily mean the end of African art; it seems, rather, that the ancient models are being richly readapted’ (1994:163-4).

*Les Statues* thus transcends the static story in which any transformation of unchangeable African artefacts was unilaterally related to colonial intervention that kidnapped these artefacts and in doing so froze them even more. In 2008, *Les Statues* is described as following: ‘the authentic creations linked to the specificity of the pantheistic and magic cultures of these regions, particularly statues and masks, have been corrupted by colonialism’ (festival d’Angers, 2008:108). However, the film largely transcends the combination of exotism and pity that can be read in the description in the festival program. The film does not come to an end with an assessment of acculturation. The death of the artefact carries along something else than only the loss of an aura (Benjamin). The resurrection of

museologised art goes even further than metamorphosis *within* the museum as theorised by Malraux in his *Le Musée imaginaire*. *Les statues* rejects thus the monolithic idea that African art would be over with the death of its 'primitive' objects and rejects the allochronism of denial of coevalness (Fabian). This critique is still pertinent today: African art is still being associated with objects from the ethnographic museum whereby the representations they promote are put outside of time. *Les Statues* leaves this synchronistic vision on art of a determinate moment to consider it as changeable, in space as well as in time, while negotiating both space and time. Thereby the film transcends the dichotomy between the traditional and the modern on the one hand and between centre and periphery on the other. The transformative power that it attributes to African art encompasses the past, projects itself into the future and is universal. The film rejects the idea of contemporary black art being deviations of a more "authentic" art, and assigns – along with Spivak – a creative potential to hybridity which engenders new meanings and which counters the very idea of museologization (cf. Mampuya 2006). The domestication and destruction of African art does not constitute a finishing point but a frame that in its turn is negotiated by contemporary African art, which holds the promise that is formulated by Marker at the end of his film.

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## **Autour de 1968, en France et ailleurs : *Le Fond de l'air était rouge***

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**Abstract (E):** The reception of *Le Fond de l'air est rouge* (*Grin Without a Cat*) by Chris. Marker (1978-2008) turned the film into an emblem of May '68, which is given much attention, but only to propose an analysis full of contrasts. In this film, which remembers the "red years", Marker puts the political commitment of his generation into perspective and tackles the problem of the relationship between the French movements and the struggles of the Third World. The solidarity as expressed by French militants seldom goes beyond a statement of principles and the fascination for revolutions abroad is a substitute for a disappointing local situation. *Le Fond de l'air est rouge* however pays tribute to the spirit of May '68, in particular in its collective modes of realization and enunciation, which allow a new definition of the committed artwork in the "era of suspicion".

**Abstract (F):** La réception du *Fond de l'air est rouge* (1978-2008) de Chris. Marker en a fait un emblème de Mai 68, événement auquel il accorde il est vrai une large place mais pour en proposer une analyse contrastée : dans ce film en forme de retour mémoriel sur les années « rouges », Marker met en perspective l'engagement politique de sa génération et affronte la question des relations entre les mouvements français et les luttes du Tiers-monde. La solidarité affirmée par les militants français est souvent restée une déclaration d'intention, et la fascination pour les révolutions étrangères a dans l'ensemble joué le rôle d'un substitut, face à une situation politique locale jugée décevante. Cependant, *Le Fond de l'air est rouge* reste tributaire de l'esprit de Mai, notamment dans ses modes collectifs de réalisation et d'énonciation qui permettent une redéfinition de l'œuvre engagée au sein de l'ère du soupçon.

**keywords:** engagement, tiers-monde, Mai 68, critique, utopies artistiques

### ***Article***

Dans la Préface au livre qui accompagne la sortie du film *Le Fond de l'air est rouge* [Maspero, Paris, 1978], Chris Marker écrit : « Le caractère dérisoire de Mai 68, mesuré à l'aune de n'importe quel affrontement asiatique ou latino-américain, est évident. » Cette affirmation peut surprendre car ce film est souvent perçu aujourd'hui comme un témoignage du Mai français – comme l'indiquent l'édition DVD et la diffusion par Arte au printemps 2008 dans une série commémorant les quarante ans de la révolte étudiante. Il comporte en effet une longue séquence consacrée aux événements de 68, en proposant une restitution chronologique précise et une analyse politique s'appuyant sur de nombreux témoignages. Par ailleurs, la genèse du film est intimement liée à Mai 68 : la société SLON ISKRA qui

produit le film est créée par Marker et d'autres camarades cette même année, dans l'intention de mettre en pratique certaines propositions des États Généraux du Cinéma.

A revoir le film, la distinction entre commémoration et hagiographie s'impose cependant : Marker n'a pas conçu *Le Fond de l'air* comme une évocation nostalgique des années militantes. Le film opère une réévaluation, non pas des luttes étudiantes et ouvrières qui se déroulèrent en mai et juin 1968, mais du mythe entourant Mai 68 et les groupes politiques qu'il a rendus visibles, par le biais d'une *mise à distance spatiale et temporelle*. 1978, l'année de sortie du film, est significative à cet égard : c'est précisément lors du dixième anniversaire de Mai que commence à se constituer la mémoire et les discours sur Mai 68 – dont certains sont aujourd'hui devenus dominants [Kristin Ross, *Mai 68 et ses vies ultérieures* (2002), Complexe – Monde diplomatique, Bruxelles-Paris, 2005].

Sans avoir l'ambition de restituer toutes les facettes de ce film qui s'apparente à un bilan personnel des « années rouges », voire au bilan d'une génération, nous voudrions éclairer la confrontation instaurée par les choix de montage entre les mouvements contestataires français et étrangers en étudiant les versions successives qui témoignent de la volonté du cinéaste de repenser dans la durée cette séquence historique. La réflexion au long cours de Marker semble en effet structurée par l'articulation entre les mouvements occidentaux et les luttes du tiers-monde. S'il contribue à jeter une lumière critique sur les événements survenus à la fin des années 60 et au début des années 70 en différents points du globe, le film n'en est pas moins l'enfant naturel de cette époque. Une époque qui a tenté de redéfinir les rapports entre l'ici et l'ailleurs, entre l'instant et son devenir mémoriel, et entre le sujet – sujet politique mais aussi sujet créateur – et la collectivité.

### **1978 et 2008, une mémoire en construction**

*Le Fond de l'air est rouge* a pour sous-titre *Scènes de la troisième guerre mondiale* et s'est décliné en une dizaine de versions entre 1978 et 2008. La monteuse Valérie Mayoux situe la genèse du film en 1973 :

Un beau jour, au chômage, j'avais décidé de mettre de l'ordre dans l'arrière-boutique d'ISKRA. C'était littéralement une arrière-boutique, il y avait des étagères où s'entassaient les boîtes de tous les gens qui avaient tourné des choses à un moment ou à un autre depuis 68, et qui n'en avaient jamais rien fait. Des chutes de toutes sortes s'étaient amassées là, pleine d'étiquettes (étiquettes parfois paranoïaques, clandestines, déguisant le contenu de la boîte), j'ai commencé à remettre un peu d'ordre dans tout ça... et à découvrir des tas de choses formidables. Je racontais ça à Chris, et je lui disais : « Il y a un film à faire, un film-collage qui raconterait une histoire à partir de tous ces morceaux. » [« Témoignage de Valérie Mayoux,



monteuse », *Positif* n° 433, mars 1997, « Dossier Chris Marker », dir. Olivier Kohn, p. 94]

Valérie Mayoux raconte que Marker s'isole alors dans un appartement « comme un moine » pour entreprendre le travail de montage, dans lequel il intègre jusqu'en 1977 un vaste ensemble d'images et de sons que lui apportent ses amis et connaissances [Conversation téléphonique avec V. Mayoux, 2006]. Selon les informations recueillies dans les archives de production d'ISKRA, la première version est un film 16mm gonflé en 35mm couleurs de quatre heures qui se décompose en quatre épisodes d'une heure en vue d'une éventuelle diffusion télévisée. Cette version connaît une sortie commerciale en janvier 1978 qui réalise 9265 entrées [chiffres du CNC]. Une version de 3 heures est réalisée pour la télévision allemande en 1978, une autre pour la télévision anglaise en 1988, et une troisième version en anglais est commandée par le Ministère des Affaires Étrangères en 1993. La chaîne Planète Câble achète le film la même année, suivie par la Sept/Arte au début de 1996 (version de 3 heures comportant de nombreux remaniements). En 1998, Chris Marker réalise une dernière version de 3 heures qui correspond à la version récemment rééditée [double DVD comprenant aussi *A bientôt j'espère* (1967), *Puisqu'on vous dit que c'est possible* (1973), *2084* (1984), *La sixième face du Pentagone* (1967) et *L'Ambassade* (1975), Arte video, 2008].

Les remaniements successifs semblent dictés par la politique des chaînes qui diffusent le film lors des anniversaires de Mai 68, mais ils manifestent aussi la volonté de Marker de le dépouiller progressivement de l'anecdotique et d'affiner l'analyse politique, avec le recul croissant de la perspective temporelle.

Le film opère à cet égard un véritable grand-écart avec le ton assertif et didactique de la majorité des productions militantes des années 60-70. En ce sens, il s'inscrit dans le débat qui oppose alors deux conceptions de la fonction du cinéma militant : la première minore la fonction esthétique au nom de l'efficacité politique, quand l'autre s'inscrit dans la tradition avant-gardiste qui lie révolution formelle et révolution politique. Le chapitre « Idéologie et esthétique du cinéma militant » de l'ouvrage coordonné par Guy Hennebelle, *Cinéma militant, histoire, structures, méthodes, idéologie et esthétique* [*Cinéma d'aujourd'hui* n°5-6, Filméditations, mars-avril 1976], permet d'illustrer cette opposition : d'un côté, Daniel Serceau écrit dans un article au titre emblématique, « L'impression de beauté est-elle réactionnaire ? », que le cinéaste militant doit renoncer à la recherche esthétique afin de produire des représentations idéologiques claires ; de l'autre, Jean-Paul Fargier regrette que la production usuelle du cinéma militant soit ennuyeuse et laide, idée qu'il reprend dans son roman *Atteinte à la fiction de l'État* [Gallimard, Paris, 1978, p. 25]. Jean Narboni tient des propos presque identiques à propos du film pro-palestinien *L'olivier* (1975) dont il est l'un des co-auteurs :

On se rendait compte qu'un certain cinéma politique qui s'était fait depuis 1968 n'était plus

possible. (...) On commençait à voir mieux, ici ou là, ce qui n'allait pas en lui : l'insouciance dédaigneuse des questions formelles, considérées comme « bourgeoises », la rigidité et la platitude, l'ennui même pas mortel – somnifère – qui s'en dégageait, le ton catéchistique, l'optimisme artificiel ou le bourdonnement dénonciateur des voix *off*... [*Cahiers du cinéma* n°264, février 1976, p. 18].

Ces préoccupations se retrouvent dans le film de Marker : la note d'intention de 1977 indique d'ailleurs une profonde incertitude idéologique manifestée par le souci, frisant l'aveu d'impuissance, de restituer la complexité des données historiques :

On a tendance à croire que la 3<sup>e</sup> guerre mondiale commencera avec le lancer d'un missile nucléaire. Je pense plutôt qu'elle s'achèvera ainsi. D'ici là continueront de se développer les figures d'un jeu compliqué dont le décryptage risque de donner du boulot aux historiens de l'avenir s'il en reste. C'est un jeu bizarre dont les règles changent au fur et à mesure de la partie, où la rivalité des super-puissances se métamorphose aussi bien en Sainte Alliance des riches contre les pauvres qu'en guerre d'élimination sélective des avant-gardes révolutionnaires, là où l'usage des bombes mettrait en danger les sources de matières premières, qu'en manipulation de ces avant-gardes elles-mêmes pour des buts qui ne sont pas les leurs. [Document ISKRA]

Malgré sa prudence, cette réévaluation propose de minorer l'opposition entre les blocs occidentaux et socialistes, ce qui permettrait de souligner le rôle croissant des luttes tiers-mondistes : le commentaire en voix *over* que Marker place dans la bouche de Jorge Semprun à l'ouverture du film traduit ce changement de perspective : « Tout a basculé avec les années 60 : on sort de la guerre froide, la Révolution de 17 est au musée... ça bascule à Cuba, en Chine, au Vietnam » (3') [le minutage correspond à la version de 1998].



La filmographie de Marker en porte la trace : les années 60 marquent un changement en profondeur des perspectives de l'action politique. Les militants communistes en particulier, parfois désemparés par la prise de conscience des crimes staliniens et l'intervention en Hongrie de 1956, ont alors l'impression d'assister à un changement de décor sur le théâtre de l'Histoire, avant l'ouverture d'un nouvel acte. La tradition des voyages dans les pays socialistes connaît un nouvel essor, mais les destinations ont changé : après la série des voyages en URSS dans les années vingt et trente, ou en Chine dans les années cinquante, les pays qui suscitent la ferveur des intellectuels ou des artistes engagés sont désormais ceux où la révolution semble encore échapper aux dangers de l'institutionnalisation, au premier rang desquels Cuba (depuis le voyage de Sartre en 1960 jusqu'à la délégation menée par Leiris en 1966 et 1967) le Vietnam (enquêtes de journalistes célèbres comme Madeleine Riffaud et Michèle Ray, d'essayistes comme Gérard Chaliand ou Jean Lacouture, et de cinéastes comme Joris Ivens, Roger Pic, ou encore Gérard Guillaume) et plus tard la Chine (voyage de la revue *Tel quel* en 1974).

Les films de Marker des années 60 sont presque exclusivement consacrés aux luttes anti-impérialiste, au premier rang desquelles figurent la révolution cubaine (*Cuba sí !* en 1961 et *La bataille des 10 millions* en 1970) et la mobilisation contre la guerre du Vietnam (*Loin du Vietnam* et *La 6<sup>e</sup> face du Pentagone* en 1967), ainsi qu'aux luttes sociales en France (*A bientôt j'espère* en 1967, les *Cinétracts* en 1968 et *Puisqu'on vous dit que c'est possible* en 1974). Dans *Le Fond de l'air est rouge*, Marker essaie de replacer la révolte de 68 au sein des bouleversements mondiaux. Cette contextualisation vaut réévaluation : la révolte de Mai apparaît finalement comme un symptôme, tant au niveau géopolitique qu'au niveau diachronique, de la vague de contestation anti-impérialiste.

## 1968 et après

*Le Fond de l'air est rouge* marque en effet un infléchissement par rapport aux films antérieurs du cinéaste. La tension inhérente à l'entreprise – constituer une mémoire des années rouges *et* tirer en 1978 les leçons d'un certain nombre d'échecs – se manifeste dès l'ouverture : la bande-son originale installe une opposition entre la musique symphonique épique de Luciano Berio et la musique synthétique composée par Marker. Sur le plan thématique, les années 1967-1968-1969 sont surreprésentées (les trois-quarts de la durée du film leur sont dévolus), mais les images de ces événements sont saisies dans un retour critique qui prend la forme d'une plongée, au moment de la retombée des espérances révolutionnaires, dans *l'inconscient visuel* dont elles sont chargées [selon l'expression de Walter Benjamin, « L'œuvre d'art à l'ère de sa reproductibilité technique » (1939), *Œuvres complètes* T. 3, Gallimard, Folio, Paris, 2000, p. 305]. La Préface de Marker au livre qui accompagne le film retravaille cette idée benjaminienne, en indiquant que les échecs futurs étaient déjà lisibles au moment de l'enregistrement des images :

C'était le premier projet de ce film : interroger en quelque sorte, autour d'un thème qui me préoccupe (l'évolution de la problématique politique dans le monde autour des années 60/70) notre *refoulé en images*. (...) En 67 tout est joué : la Révolution culturelle est reprise en main, l'échec de la gauche révolutionnaire au Venezuela (plus significatif, quoique moins spectaculaire, que la mort du Che en Bolivie) a marqué le tournant de la tentative castriste de « révolution dans la révolution », partout les pouvoirs ont commencé à infiltrer et contrôler les groupes « subversifs ». (...) [*Le Fond de l'air est rouge*, p. 5. Je souligne].

De longues séquences du film consacrées à la mort du Che (40' à 47'), à l'échec de Mai 68 (49' à 1h29) et au Printemps de Prague (1h31 à 1h55) soulignent grâce au montage oppositionnel les fissures qui fragilisent le bloc progressiste. Par exemple, l'insertion au sein de la séquence pragoise d'un discours de Fidel Castro justifiant l'intervention soviétique (discours du 23 août 1968) permet de mesurer le chemin parcouru depuis *Cuba sí !* qui traduisait quinze ans plus tôt l'enthousiasme de Marker pour la jeune révolution. Le discours castriste est alors « attaqué » par le cinéaste grâce aux choix des supports d'enregistrement et au mixage : les images ne cessent de trembler et l'élocution de Castro est perturbée par l'intervention d'une musique électronique agressive.

Les opérations de montage permettent ainsi d'envisager les « événements-images » selon un crible à la fois politique et iconique autorisé par la distance temporelle. Le cinéaste s'empare à nouveau de ses propres images, ou d'images tournées par d'autres, pour les réinterpréter et en révéler leur « refoulé » au sein d'une réorganisation critique. Comme le montre François Niney en opposant « commémoration » et « reprise », Marker se livre à un véritable travail de reprise des images, dans les

diverses acceptions du terme : mise à jour d'images oubliées, réexamen de leur signification et nouveau travail de montage [François Niney, *L'épreuve du réel à l'écran*, Nathan, Paris, 1997]. La nouvelle convocation des images permet au film de dégager plusieurs niveaux de significations, en fonction de l'évolution des événements et en fonction des images ou des discours auxquels elles se trouvent confrontées : le véritable sens d'une image apparaît dans l'après-coup de son enregistrement.

Marker entreprend par exemple (2h34) de remonter les images de *La 6<sup>e</sup> face du Pentagone*, son propre film réalisé en 1968 : la marche du 21 octobre 1967 des activistes américains y était alors présentée comme une victoire. Ces images sont citées une première fois dans l'ouverture lyrique du *Fond de l'air est rouge* avec la même signification originale : le Vietnam apparaît comme la lutte phare de la fin des années 60. Mais la reprise ultérieure de ces images dans le cours du film prend un tout autre sens, illustrant l'idée fondamentale énoncée par Marker : « On ne sait jamais ce qu'on filme » (1h43). En effet, si les images de manifestants franchissant les barrières et attaquant le Pentagone prennent un sens victorieux au sein d'un film militant en 1968, elles peuvent éveiller un tout autre sentiment chez un spectateur américain qui l'aperçoit par exemple lors du journal télévisé. Enfin, elles prennent une troisième signification – ouverte cette fois – dans le montage de 1977 qui s'interroge *a posteriori* sur l'usage des images et la guerre des représentations que se livrent le Pouvoir et ses détracteurs.

L'écart temporel entre le tournage et le montage est pour Marker l'occasion d'engager une réflexion sur ce qui a été saisi (ou raté) par les images au moment où elles ont été tournées. Autrement dit, le cinéaste creuse la distance entre la « préfiguration » de l'événement au moment de l'enregistrement et celui de sa « configuration » narrative à l'étape du montage [selon les catégories de Paul Ricœur, *Temps et récit I, L'intrigue et le récit historique*, Seuil, Paris, 1983] : la « configuration » serait ainsi capable de révéler les trous de la « préfiguration » par un mouvement de reprise rétrospective. A la même époque, Godard et Miéville à l'occasion du film *Ici et ailleurs* (1976) remettent sur sa table de montage des images tournées cinq ans plus tôt par le groupe Dziga Vertov dans les bases palestiniennes de Cisjordanie, non pour réarticuler un discours pro-palestinien mais pour s'interroger, eux aussi, sur la violence et les non-dits des images militantes. Le travail markerien de réexamen des images reste cependant singulier car la fonction critique ne se réduit pas à une démystification, comme c'est le cas chez Godard, dans la tradition critique inaugurée par les *Mythologies* de Barthes [Seuil, Paris, 1957]. La critique s'accompagne en effet chez Marker d'une tentative de reprise mémorielle : il s'agit aussi de constituer un catalogue d'images qui conservent, par-delà leur fonction première, une mémoire militante. L'enjeu premier des images – informer pour agir immédiatement – est reversé dans un enjeu bien plus ambitieux – conserver pour orienter les actions à venir.

## Ici et ailleurs

La mise en évidence de la distance temporelle qui caractérise le témoignage rétrospectif est redoublée par l'examen des rapports entre la situation locale et la situation mondiale : il apparaît dans le développement du *Fond de l'air est rouge* que les mouvements étrangers sont devenus des prétextes à identification et que les impasses du mouvement français ont été occultées. Comme dans *Loin du Vietnam* (1967), le film met en tension les pays révolutionnaires et la réalité française – mais ici le retour mémoriel sur les révolutions étrangères aboutit à une (auto-) critique de la fascination pour l'ailleurs et de l'échec à créer un « nouveau Vietnam » dans les pays occidentaux.

A première vue, Marker semble reconduire le mythe de la convergence des luttes : le film embrasse la totalité du mouvement progressiste et le montage fait alterner les images des combats menés par les contestataires des pays capitalistes (Paris, Berlin, États-Unis, etc.) et ceux menés dans les pays du tiers-monde (Vietnam, Cuba, Brésil, Chili, Bolivie, Venezuela, etc.) à la fin des années 60 – ce qui correspond bien au titre du film. Dans cette logique, le spectateur passe de façon fluide dans la séquence introductive de la résistance vietnamienne aux grèves françaises de 1967, puis de celles-ci à la révolution cubaine : en faisant une Histoire globale des combats révolutionnaires, Marker n'hésite pas à mettre en parallèle le mouvement ouvrier français et les luttes anti-impérialistes. L'apparition en France de la « nouvelle gauche », au moment où les ouvriers organisent des grèves avec occupation d'usines et contestent la direction du PCF ou de la CGT, entre en résonance avec la position de pays qui comme Cuba semblent alors s'émanciper de la tutelle soviétique. La voix *over* qui assure la transition entre la séquence consacrée aux grèves annonciatrices de 68 et la séquence cubaine évoque une concomitance temporelle qui traduirait aussi une convergence idéologique : « Au moment où les ouvriers de la Rhodia imposaient un nouveau style de grève avec occupation, qui annonçait Mai, qui annonçait LIP, on apprenait que Castro rompait avec les PC orthodoxes d'Amérique latine. Révolution dans la révolution. » (30'). L'idée d'une convergence des luttes se poursuit dans la séquence cubaine qui insiste sur la politique internationaliste de Castro et comporte des développements sur l'envoi de guérilleros au Congo ou en Bolivie.



L'idée de convergence est cependant progressivement mise à mal. Dans la séquence suivante (35'), le montage alterné entre des plans de militants français et des plans d'un discours de Castro finit par souligner les différences des uns et de l'autre sur la question de la lutte armée et de l'actualité de Marx. Les premiers font du théoricien de la lutte des classes une référence incontournable, alors que Castro défend le bricolage idéologique en fonction d'une situation donnée. Ces deux positions s'expriment chacune selon un régime spécifique de discours : les militants français se placent sur le plan du débat d'idées alors que Castro prône l'action immédiate et la guérilla. Le spectateur est alors « libre » de choisir entre ces deux points de vue, étant entendu que le discours pragmatique du leader cubain risque fort de l'emporter : le montage ouvert et paratactique qui caractérise tout le film n'en induit pas moins certaines directions de lecture. Par ailleurs, l'essentiel du discours de Castro tient dans la formule : « Nous devons compter sur nos propres forces » qui affirme une indépendance relative à l'égard du grand frère soviétique, mais aussi à l'égard des déclarations de solidarité à travers le monde.

L'hésitation du *Fond de l'air* sur la validité de l'idée de convergence apparaît à nouveau dans le traitement de la mort du Che, qui est montrée à la fois comme le point de départ des actions politiques de 1968 – le film fait se succéder des images d'étudiants arborant des drapeaux marqués de la figure du Che après avoir présenté les photos du cadavre du guérillero, dans une logique de prise de relais – mais aussi comme la fin de l'utopie de la lutte armée. Guevara n'est plus alors qu'une icône, un nom qu'on clame dans les manifestations (la voix *over* tourne en dérision les slogans du type « Guevara, Che Che ! Ho Chi Minh, Ho Ho ! »), ou un effet de mode avec T-shirts et drapeaux frappés à son effigie (48'). Le film semble alors indiquer que les grandes déclarations d'« internationalisme prolétarien » des jeunes militants français qui se disent prêts à partir en Bolivie ou au Vietnam ne sont que des slogans sans lendemain, à la limite de la fanfaronnade – rappelant ceux tenus par le héros d'un court-métrage méconnu de Godard, *L'aller-retour des enfants prodiges* (1968) : les luttes étrangères sont perçues en Europe en des termes trop souvent héroïco-pathétiques, qui ne sont pas sans rappeler le martyrologue catholique.

## Allers et retours

Le film abandonne alors l'hypothèse optimiste de la convergence des luttes pour s'interroger sur la fonction des images et des discours sur l'ailleurs. L'attention portée en France aux combats anti-impérialistes semble légitime, mais le film semble indiquer que les différents partis de la gauche française sont incapables de tirer les leçons de l'échec des mouvements étrangers. Le soutien aux guerres révolutionnaires serait alors une manière d'afficher une unité de façade et d'occulter les divisions. Paradoxalement, les militants ne voient pas que la défaite des tentatives insurrectionnelles est justement due aux divisions de la direction politique : le film rappelle que la tentative de Che Guevara de créer un mouvement guérillero en Bolivie échoue car le PC bolivien refuse d'appuyer la guérilla, comme l'explique longuement son dirigeant Mario Monje (47'). Déjà en 1975, un autre film de Marker, le « documentaire fictif » intitulé *L'ambassade* [selon les distinctions proposées par Guy Gauthier, *Le documentaire, un autre cinéma*, Nathan, Paris, 1995], donnait corps à cette idée : dans l'ambassade occupée par des réfugiés après un coup d'État qui rappelle assez celui de Pinochet, les militants de différentes obédiences continuent leur lutte fratricide dans de longues discussions où ils se renvoient mutuellement la responsabilité de la défaite.

Dans *Le Fond de l'air*, au moment de conclure la première phase du mouvement contestataire qui culmine en 68, la voix *over* souligne les divisions du camp révolutionnaire français, en rappelant les conséquences dramatiques du manque d'unité de la gauche chilienne :

Il y avait tout un répertoire de mots imbéciles : gauchos, révisos, pour noyer la complexité des conflits dans une espèce de système binaire où chacun ne se définissait plus par rapport à la lutte de classe mais par rapport à la guerre des organisations. Du moment qu'on attribue à une organisation le monopole de la lutte des classes, ça ne faisait évidemment pas de différence. Comme s'il fallait attendre un jour où on se retrouverait côte à côte sur les banquettes d'un stade bouclé par les militaires pour s'apercevoir qu'on avait quand même quelque chose à se dire. (2h23).

De même, la longue séquence consacrée à Mai 68 (49' à 1h30) entreprend de dégonfler le mythe qui a transformé *a posteriori* en victoire symbolique une défaite politique (victoires de la droite à partir des législatives de juin 1968). Après avoir retracé à l'aide de bandes tournées par divers opérateurs l'épisode de la « Nuit des barricades » du 10 au 11 mai, Marker propose un montage alterné entre des plans d'un film tourné cette nuit-là (en noir et blanc), et quelques plans tournés quelque temps après (en couleur), alors que la rue a retrouvé son aspect quotidien. Le montage obéit à une logique de contrepoint temporel : la violence révolutionnaire n'a été qu'une brève flambée et les choses sont rapidement rentrées dans l'ordre. Un plan sur l'eau qui dévale les caniveaux de la rue Gay-Lussac



insiste sur l'idée du cours irréversible du temps et de la versatilité de la mémoire. Il ne reste plus du Mai étudiant qu'un livre de Cohn-Bendit trônant à la devanture d'une librairie. Ensuite, un zoom arrière sur une photo de Paris filmée au banc-titre – qui rappelle une image de l'ouverture de *La Jetée* : « Et puis, ce fut la fin de Paris... » – souligne la prise de distance par rapport au mythe soixante-huitard. Le commentaire en voix *over* enfonce le clou : « Naissance d'une légende... À l'échelle de n'importe quelle nuit d'Irlande, de n'importe quel affrontement Sud-Américain, la nuit des barricades était dérisoire... » Le montage enchaîne des images de répressions policières sauvages en Irlande, au Chili et au Brésil : le montage qui fait alterner les images de l'ici et de l'ailleurs fonctionne maintenant selon un régime pleinement oppositionnel.



La volonté de réévaluer l'importance de Mai 68 est également lisible dans le passage du montage de 1977 à celui de 1993 : Marker coupe certains plans pour raccourcir une séquence dont la durée risque de conférer une importance démesurée à l'épisode. Il s'attache alors à ausculter le mouvement français en insistant sur la division qui oppose la génération du PCF issue de la Résistance et de l'anticolonialisme, et celle des *sixties* qui rêve de rupture et de révolution culturelle – parfois ironiquement lorsqu'il montre un étudiant se vantant en Sorbonne de ses fréquentations prolétaires, parfois sérieusement dans une séquence qui cite les propos d'un vieil ouvrier rapportés par le syndicaliste Pol Cèbe. Marker conclut d'ailleurs son film en revenant sur le clivage : « Le rêve communiste a implosé, le capitalisme a remporté la guerre. Mais une logique paradoxale fait que certains des ennemis déclarés du totalitarisme, ces hommes de la nouvelle gauche, à qui ce film est consacré, ont été entraînés dans le même tourbillon. Le scorpion et la tortue d'Orson Welles. » (3h01) Marker fait ici référence de mémoire à *Mister Arkadin* (1955), film dans lequel le personnage principal interprété par Welles raconte cette fable :

Un scorpion voulait traverser une rivière. Il demanda à une grenouille de le porter sur son dos. La grenouille répondit : « Sûrement pas, tu pourrais me piquer avec ta queue. » La piqûre du scorpion signifie la mort... Mais le scorpion est un animal logique : « Sois logique, si je te piquais, tu mourrais, et moi avec. » La grenouille accepte, elle laisse le scorpion monter sur son dos. Mais au milieu de la rivière, la grenouille ressent une terrible douleur : le scorpion

vient de la piquer. « Logique ! s'écrie la grenouille à l'agonie, qui coule avec le scorpion. Il n'y a aucune logique là-dedans ! » « Je sais, répond le scorpion, mais je n'y peux rien : c'est mon caractère... » [Je traduis.]

Notons que cette séquence était déjà citée en tant que dernier plan de *Critique de la séparation* de Guy Debord (1961). Dans *Le Fond de l'air*, l'analogie est claire : en combattant le communisme orthodoxe, les gauchistes ont provoqué leur propre naufrage.

Le montage qui opère des allers-retours entre la France et les pays étrangers permet d'éviter le récit fasciné des luttes du tiers-monde : le véritable enjeu du film serait donc moins de retracer l'épopée révolutionnaire mondiale, dont Mai 68 serait en France l'épisode le plus saillant, que d'interroger la société française des années 60-70 et son rapport à l'ailleurs. La conclusion du film poursuit d'ailleurs cette logique : après avoir évoqué la mort d'Allende qui sonnerait le glas du mythe tiers-mondiste, la version de 1977 rappelle dans un montage-séquence les nombreuses luttes ouvrières qui se sont déroulées en France entre 1973 et 1977. Cet intérêt pour le *hic et nunc* se retrouve dans le souci générationnel manifesté par le besoin de réactualiser le film par des versions successives. Le cinéaste récuse ainsi les interprétations univoques et introduit un dialogue entre les positions géographiques et idéologiques. *Le Fond de l'air* est peut-être une fresque de l'épopée révolutionnaire, mais il se présente surtout comme une œuvre polyphonique qui mêle des voix et des analyses contradictoires. Par le partage des images et des discours, le film s'inscrit pleinement au sein des utopies des années 60 qui tentaient de refonder la pratique artistique.

### **Singulier et pluriel**

Depuis *Loin du Vietnam* et la création des Groupes Medvedkine avec des cinéastes et des ouvriers de Besançon à l'occasion de la réalisation d'*A bientôt j'espère* (1967), Marker conçoit chaque film comme une expérience collective, même s'il est en fait possible d'identifier un groupe informel de techniciens qui participent régulièrement aux films produits par SLON ISKRA, notamment Antoine Bonfanti (son), François Reichenbach, Marc Riboud, Mario Marret (image), Valérie Mayoux (montage) et d'autres. Le générique du *Fond de l'air* l'affirme : « Les véritables auteurs de ce film, bien que pour la plupart ils n'aient pas été consultés sur l'usage fait ici de leurs documents, sont les innombrables cameramen, preneurs de son, témoins et militants. » (3h). Avec ce refus de l'auctorialité et de la hiérarchie traditionnelle des équipes techniques, tous les « collaborateurs » sont placés sur le même plan, qu'ils soient techniciens ou sujets filmés.

*Le Fond de l'air est rouge* se signale également par la diversité des commentateurs en voix *over* (Chris Marker, Simone Signoret, Yves Montand, Jorge Semprun, François Maspero et les acteurs Davos

Hanich, Sandra Scarnati et François Périer) et des personnes interviewées, ce qui permet d'éviter une lecture univoque de la décennie militante. La multiplicité des opinions et des voix, ainsi que la variété des événements convoqués par un montage non démonstratif, confère au film une signification politique ouverte, selon l'intention de Marker :

Il y a ce dialogue enfin possible entre toutes ces voix que l'illusion lyrique de 68 avait fait se rencontrer un court moment. (...) Le montage restitue, on l'espère, à l'histoire sa polyphonie. (...) Je ne me vante pas d'avoir réussi un film dialectique. Mais j'ai essayé pour une fois (ayant en mon temps passablement abusé de l'exercice du pouvoir par le commentaire-dirigeant) de rendre au spectateur, par le montage, « son » commentaire, c'est-à-dire son pouvoir. [Préface, *Le Fond de l'air est rouge*, p. 6]

Ce faisant, Marker monteur se met au service des images qui ont été tournées par d'autres. *Le Fond de l'air est rouge* aligne ainsi des images et des textes mystérieux dans un simple bout à bout à la Prévert ou à la Perec : « On a reçu ça, un film S8... Une autre fois on a reçu une bande magnétique... Une autre fois... » (2h17). Le pseudonyme « Marker » permettrait ainsi de maintenir la puissance d'effraction de l'individu au sein des représentations sociales, tout en préservant la force politique du collectif. Les films collectifs comme *Loin du Vietnam*, *La Sixième Face du Pentagone*, *La Bataille des 10 millions* ou *Le Fond de l'air est rouge* produisent cependant par moments un trouble énonciatif : l'effacement des situations d'énonciation particulières risque de donner l'impression d'une absence d'énonciateur : le spectateur ignorerait « d'où ça parle », et la vérité du témoignage ne serait plus garantie par l'attestation du témoin, comme le note Gérard Leblanc : « On relèvera dans ce film une pratique qui surprend de la part de Marker. De nombreux extraits de films sont utilisés. Cités une première fois, ils ne le sont plus dans la suite du montage, lorsque d'autres extraits des mêmes films sont utilisés. Ainsi en va-t-il pour *La CGT en mai 68* de Paul Seban (1968). Le problème posé est d'ordre éthique : a-t-on le droit d'utiliser des films à d'autres fins que les leurs ? » [« Sous la représentation, le cinéma », *Les années pop, Cinéma et politique : 1956-1970*, BPI Centre Pompidou, Paris, 2001, note]. En même temps, l'hétérogénéité des matériaux n'est pas gommée par Marker : la plurivocité permet de ne pas réduire les propos à une fin unique, et cette mise en commun des images est bénéfique en termes de diffusion : les témoignages sont en quelque sorte libres de droits, ils peuvent être récupérés par n'importe qui pour donner lieu à la production de nouveaux témoignages filmiques.



Dans certaines séquences, le film manifeste à l'inverse un retour du cinéaste en tant qu'auteur. Il apparaît ainsi comme le récit d'un parcours politique personnel, ou une méditation sur le temps qui passe et qui emporte les souvenirs et les illusions. Dans ce mouvement de subjectivation, le film apparaît comme un réexamen libre et personnel des années où le fond de l'air *était* rouge. Le commentaire *over* comporte ainsi des remarques subjectives exprimées parfois à la première personne : ces notations qui s'apparentent à un journal personnel prennent la forme de lettres ou de confidences adressées aux compagnons de route, à l'exemple de la « Lettre à quelques camarades » (1h56). Le genre de la lettre permet de nouer le fil avec les films antérieurs à la première personne comme *Dimanche à Pékin* (1955) ou *Lettre de Sibérie* (1957), en même temps qu'il annonce *Sans soleil*. Ce film de 1982 rompt avec le cinéma militant tout en reprenant les interrogations sur la mémoire abordées dans *La Jetée*, redécouvertes dans *Le Fond de l'air*, et appelées à se développer dans les films suivants.

La subjectivité s'inscrit également dans les opérations de tournage et de montage. *Le Fond de l'air* rappelle que le cinéma n'est pas un dispositif neutre d'enregistrement, mais que toute prise de vue procède de décisions ou d'émotions personnelles. Un carton qui ouvre une série d'images « ratées » pose cette question : « Pourquoi quelquefois les images se mettent-elles à trembler ? » – belle formule qui confère par déplacement d'attribution des sentiments aux images elles-mêmes (49'). Cette dimension personnelle apparaît encore dans luttres privilégiées par le film – ou en négatif dans certains « oublis », dont certaines rédactions sourcilleuse dressent la liste à la sortie du film : Palestiniens, femmes, écologie [« Table ronde », *Cahiers du cinéma* n° 282, janvier 1978], Cambodge, Chine, Italie et Angola [*Les nouvelles littéraires*, 24 novembre 1977]. Enfin, le refus du dogmatisme et le rapport subjectif à l'Histoire autorise certains traits d'ironie. Le montage de 1993 intègre ainsi un « Intermède comique », selon le carton qui introduit les vœux de De Gaulle à la nation pour l'année 1968. Le titre

de la version anglaise, *A grin without a cat*, fait bizarrement référence à Lewis Carroll : « I've often seen a cat without a grin, thought Alice ; but a grin without a cat ! » [*Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865), Juvenile Fiction, 2007, p. 94]. De même, les « Notes à l'usage des jeunes générations » que comporte le livre qui accompagne la sortie du *Fond de l'air* précisent avec humour l'identité de personnalités publiques (vouées à un futur oubli historique ?) comme Alain Geismar et Roland Castro [p. 82].

Si *Le Fond de l'air est rouge* permet à la voix subjective de percer au sein des discours multiples, le film ne manifeste aucune régression vers la mystique de l'auteur qui avait caractérisé les membres (et apparentés) de la Nouvelle vague. Il témoigne plutôt d'une volonté de faire des films politiques réalisés par tous et appartenant à tous. Le cinéma pourrait ainsi s'instituer en microcosme utopique où tente de s'élaborer un lien authentiquement fondé sur le libre jeu (Je) avec le Nous. Cette volonté est partagée par les nombreux collectifs de cinéma militants de l'époque, comme le rappelle Jean-Louis Comolli :

Tel est bien le paradoxe du cinéma « militant ». Construire du « nous » pour filmer (...) et faire passer dans le film le « nous » de la lutte ; sauf que, pour que cela advienne, il n'y aurait d'autre voie que de tenir au « je » du geste, de l'énonciation. Un « nous » qui dit « je ». Éternelle question posée dans la pratique du cinéma, dans le faire des films. Mais cette question n'est-elle pas la question politique elle-même ? [« Lignes de fuite », *Le mois du film documentaire : Richard Copans, de Cinéluttes à Racines*, BPI – Centre Pompidou, Paris, 2004]



## Luttes passées et à venir

La représentation de la « révolution des autres » à travers la filmographie de Marker semble épouser étroitement l'évolution historique de cette problématique : le cinéaste a pu éprouver une fascination pour l'ailleurs géographique ou social, comme l'indiquent ses films depuis *Cuba sí !* Dans cette optique, *Le Fond de l'air est rouge* produit d'abord des formes convergentes qui traduisent l'idée d'un front commun des luttes, mais le montage prend vite un sens oppositionnel : au cours de la décennie militante 1967-1978, la question des rapports entre l'ici et l'ailleurs a finalement connu un déplacement considérable : alors que *Loin du Vietnam* affirmait la perspective d'une solidarité qui ne soit pas un simple fantasme identificatoire, mais l'ouverture d'un nouveau front dans les pays occidentaux, *Le Fond de l'air est rouge* ne peut qu'enregistrer l'échec de cette perspective. Si ce film continue d'être diffusé, c'est que, par-delà la sévérité de son jugement ponctuel sur les années d'engagement radical, il parvient à échapper au discours strictement idéologique : il s'inscrit en cela au sein d'une tendance qui apparaît au cours des années 70, celle des œuvres engagées qui comportent un penchant analytique de plus en plus affirmé. *Le Fond de l'air est rouge*, avec d'autres œuvres comme *Ici et ailleurs* de Godard-Miéville ou dans le champ de la littérature *Un captif amoureux* de Jean Genet [Gallimard, Paris, 1986], est porté par l'ambition de renouveler l'expression politique par l'introduction d'une tension critique – autrement dit, il tente de perpétuer l'engagement artistique au sein de « l'ère du soupçon ».

*Le Fond de l'air* n'est pas un *Tombeau* : le film est conçu comme une contribution à la sauvegarde de la mémoire militante, ce qui est une fonction nouvelle du cinéma engagé contre « le Pouvoirs nous voudraient sans mémoire » (carton final, 3h01). Il apparaît finalement comme une réserve hétéroclite de souvenirs pour les générations suivantes, qui permettra de rappeler l'importance du mouvement contestataire des années 60 et 70 tout en incitant les futurs spectateurs à tirer eux-mêmes la leçon des illusions triomphalistes, dans la mesure où Marker ne livre jamais de jugement politique frontal sur les événements, et prend soin de ne jamais forclure son propos. Le commentaire conclusif « 30 ans après, il y a toujours des loups » peut alors être lu comme une façon de passer le relais. Loin de tout défaitisme et de toute nostalgie, *Le Fond de l'air est rouge* se constitue plutôt en une formidable banque d'images – une mémoire collective mise à la disposition des luttes à venir.

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## **“If they don’t see happiness in the picture at least they’ll see the black”: Chris Marker’s *Sans Soleil* and the Lyotardian Sublime**

Author: Sarah French

**Abstract (E):** This paper examines Chris Marker’s film *Sans Soleil* in relation to Jean-François Lyotard’s theory of the sublime. Through an analysis of the film’s representation of memory, time and temporality it will argue that Marker’s film effectively “invokes the unrepresentable in presentation itself” (Lyotard, 1992: 15).

**Abstract (F):** Cet article examine le film *Sans Soleil* de Chris Marker en relation avec la théorie du sublime de Jean-François Lyotard. A travers une analyse de la représentation de la mémoire, du temps et de la temporalité du film, il soutient que le film de Marker invoque d’une manière effective “l’irreprésentable dans la représentation meme” (Lyotard, 1992: 15).

**keywords:** sublime, memory, time, temporality, indeterminacy, unrepresentable, *Sans Soleil*, Chris Marker

### ***Article***

*The postmodern artist or writer is in the position of a philosopher: the text he writes or the work he creates is not in principle governed by preestablished rules and cannot be judged according to a determinant judgement, by the application of given categories to his text or work. Such rules or categories is what the work or text is investigating. The artist and the writer therefore work without rules and in order to establish the rules for what will have been made.*

*This is why the work and the text can take on the properties of an event; it is also why they would arrive too late for their author; or, in what amounts to the same thing, why the work of making them would always begin too soon.*

Jean- François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Explained*

This paper will examine Chris Marker’s film *Sans Soleil* (1982) in relation to Jean- François Lyotard’s writings on avant-garde cinema and the sublime. It will argue that Marker utilizes cinematic techniques that challenge traditional forms of filmic representation. Chris Marker is undeniably Lyotard’s postmodern artist “in the position of the philosopher” whose works perform a dramatic break with preestablished rules and categories of representation. Marker’s films represent a form of counter-cinema or what Lyotard describes as an “Acinema” that interrogates the conventions of filmmaking and invents new rules and new modes of representation. With *Sans Soleil*, Marker creates



a personal essay film, an original genre that combines documentary and fictional techniques with Marker's poetic and philosophical observations. The unique stylistic and aesthetic qualities of *Sans Soleil* produced a landmark film that has, to use Lyotard's phrase above, "take[n] on the properties of an event."

*Sans Soleil* deals primarily with the themes of time, place, representation, history and memory. The film's portrayal of memory encompasses personal reflection and cultural memory as well as a collective sense of history, yet memories are never fixed in time. Rather, they are endlessly modified in different historical moments, open to future determinations and mediated by the camera and filmmaker. Marker's project to represent memory and history is bound up with his need to find more ethical and appropriate methods with which to represent the past than those available in the traditional documentary genre. Marker constructs new representational strategies that problematise the notion of an authentic history and exposes the limits of representation. For this reason *Sans Soleil* resists traditional methods of filmic analysis and demands an approach that gives focus to the film's ambiguities and indeterminacies. This paper will suggest that Lyotard's theory of the sublime provides a vital framework for such an understanding of Marker's film.

This reading is supported by a close analysis of Marker's unconventional use of cinematic time and an examination of the film's representation of memory, time and temporality. Film scholars have frequently written about Marker's depiction of time and memory in paradoxical terms. The subtitle of Catherine Lupton's 2006 book on Chris Marker is "memories of the future" suggestive of Marker's ability to create filmic 'memories' of what is yet to come. Similarly, Edward Branigan aptly describes the mood that pervades many of the sequences in *Sans Soleil* as one of "premature nostalgia" (1992: 215). Such observations resonate with Lyotard's notion in the epigraph above that for the creator the work of making a text or film will always begin to soon. In *Sans Soleil* Marker compensates for this by assembling his fragmented images of the past, present and future in such a way that they remain ambiguous and open to determination. This paper will suggest that the film's emphasis on indeterminacy, temporality and the unrepresentable aspects of human experience shares some significant affinities with Lyotard's writings on the sublime.

## **The Sublime**

In broad terms the feeling of the sublime occurs when an experience confounds conventional understanding, when the power of an object or event is such that it exceeds the limits of language or representation. This notion of the sublime can be traced back to the first century CE to a book entitled *On Sublimity*, attributed to the Greek critic Longinus, however, it was during the eighteenth century that the sublime became a source of intense interest and debate both as a response to the aesthetics of

romantic art and literature and as a subject of philosophical enquiry. For Lyotard, the two most important accounts of the sublime are Edmund Burke's *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin or our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful* (1757) and Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Judgement* (1790), the third of Kant's three books of critical philosophy.

For both Burke and Kant, the sublime experience produces an inexpressible sensation of pleasure and pain when one is confronted with something too great in power or magnitude for the mind to comprehend. Both philosophers observe the potential for this experience to occur in response to nature: in the case of the expanse of the ocean, for example, comprehension remains incomplete because the eye cannot take in the entirety of the object. Kant describes such experiences of overwhelming spatial or temporal magnitude as the 'mathematical' sublime, which also includes notions of infinity and the cosmos. While the sublime experience results in an initial cognitive failure, it also produces a sense of release and joy insofar as the phenomenon can be grasped as an idea. In other words, in the moment that comprehension is defeated, the mind simultaneously gets a sense of something that lies beyond thought and language, which produces pleasure, relief and even jubilation.

Kant distinguishes between the 'mathematical sublime' and the 'dynamic sublime,' the latter of which refers to concepts that are overwhelmingly powerful such as hurricanes, volcanoes, waterfalls or lightning storms. Such phenomena produce fear and abject inferiority; in the face of such an experience the subject is rendered helpless and insignificant. Yet the dynamic sublime can also be a source of delight so long as it is contemplated from afar. Kant's notion of the dynamic sublime shares some affinities with Burke's understanding of the sublime. For Burke the sublime feeling produces terror by threatening to overwhelm and annihilate the subject but can create pleasure when kept at a safe distance or controlled, such as through the medium of art. (Lyotard, 1989b, 204-205).

For Burke and Kant, the sublime sentiment arises out of a cognitive failure in response to nature. Where Lyotard's theory offers an advance upon these earlier theorisations of the sublime is in his view that the aesthetic of the sublime can come from the object itself. The sublime in Lyotard's writings becomes something that can be understood not merely as an absence or lost object but as something that can be experienced as an affect initiated by a work of art. Lyotard writes: "here and now there is a painting, rather than nothing, and that is sublime" (1989b: 199). Lyotard proposes that in avant-garde painting 'something' happens through the very presence of the paint and the image that produces the sublime feeling. In his discussion of the work of American abstract painter and art theorist Barnett Newman, Lyotard illustrates that the sublime may be evoked through the co-existence of presence and absence. Newman's paintings are characterised by their vast expanses of solid colour, punctuated by asymmetrical lines that the artist refers to as 'zips.' The viewer becomes absorbed and overwhelmed by the vastness of the colour field while experiencing a sense of pain or anguish in the face of

something that fails to communicate cogent meaning. Without the presence of a narrative or subject matter, the viewer is left with the mere presence of the painting itself (Lyotard: 1989c)

The ‘something that happens’ is, for Lyotard, intrinsically related to time; ‘the time that the painting is,’ the ‘now,’ is unable to be thought in terms of a linear understanding of time (1989c: 240). For Lyotard, this potential for avant-garde art to disrupt a linear structuring of time is a political act. By creating a break or rupture within the time of development or progress, which for Lyotard is also the time of consumer capitalism, avant-garde art disrupts the linear progression of the grand narrative of history. While Lyotard sees avant-garde painting as the privileged site for such a disruption, in his article ‘Acinema’ he also suggests it may be present in certain forms of experimental cinema. (1989a). In this article Lyotard presents a perspective that prefigures his later notion of the sublime and also provides an important discussion on the political potential of experimental film. I suggest that Marker’s *Sans Soleil* can be read as a realisation of Lyotard’s avant-garde cinema, particularly through its resistance to conventional forms of linear time.

For Lyotard, the major stake of Edmund Burke’s *Enquiry* was “to show that the sublime is kindled by the threat of nothing further happening” (Lyotard 1989b: 204). This idea connects the sublime with the question of time (or the stopping of time) and the notion of absence (the void). In the opening moments of *Sans Soleil*, the viewer is confronted with “the threat of nothing further happening” through the placing of a piece of black leader between the images. The blackness provides us with a missing image, an exclusion, absence or void, a replacement for something that is unable to be represented. The black, a metaphorical image for the ‘nothing,’ is countered with an image that is imbued with the status of ‘everything,’ an image of three children on a road in Iceland. The voiceover states, “He said that for him it was the image of happiness and also that he had tried several times to link it to other images.” The next image presented is an American warplane being lowered into an aircraft carrier. As in Marker’s earlier film *La Jetée* (1962), *Sans Soleil* opens with an image of childhood innocence that is immediately followed by the image of an airplane that in both films signifies war and death. The precise relationship between these images is deliberately ambiguous yet the juxtaposition of these same images and other images with similar connotations are to reoccur throughout the film.

The opening sequence ends with a return to the black leader and the voiceover states, “One day I’ll have to put it all alone at the beginning of a film with a long piece of black leader. If they don’t see happiness in the picture at least they’ll see the black.” I suggest that the image of the children in Iceland is one of the film’s key sublime images and one that functions as what Lyotard describes as an ‘act’ or an ‘event,’ a ‘dramatic burst of energy; a sense of being teetering on the edge of nothingness’ (Shaw 2006: 122). The black leader and its evocation of ‘nothingness’ enhances the ‘sense of being’

invested in the image of the Icelandic children. This image, as I will argue later, stands as an important leitmotif that illustrates the cameraman's nostalgic and melancholic relationship to memory and representation.

### **Time and Temporality**

For Lyotard, the question that emerges from avant-garde art is 'Is it happening?' as an event in the present, as opposed to 'it has happened' or 'it is going to happen' (1989b: 198). A similar sense of the present tense pervades *Sans Soleil*. The film consists of footage that Marker filmed in a range of geographical locations including Africa, Japan, Iceland, France and San Francisco, and in different moments in time from 1965 to 1981, yet the texts and images are rarely contextualised in relation to their spatial or temporal locations. As the images unfold on the screen an unnamed female enunciator reads the letters that she has received from an unnamed cameraman (named Sandor Krasna in the credits) and occasionally comments on the letters. While the letters are generally structured in the past tense ("he wrote me"), the images themselves are framed in the present tense as they are brought into being in the present moment through the cameraman's recollections. The images are often presented as seemingly arbitrary fragments: an aircraft carrier, an African dancer, a Japanese advertisement with an owl on it, emus on the isle de France, etc. The cameraman has collected images as one might collect objects, and then assembled or patched them together using a process of free association that is variously related to the comparable content of the images, the similar (or disparate) emotions they produce in the filmmaker, and their complimentary (or contrasting) aesthetic and formal qualities.

For the viewer the seemingly arbitrary and transient presentation of the images creates a sense of timelessness that imitates the function of memory (memory is necessarily located in the present, even as it refers to a referent that is absent and in the past). Marker's images resemble memories that have already been filtered, rearranged and placed alongside other memories; they are depicted as fragmented moments without a before or after, only a 'Now.' The filmmaker thus resists narrative continuity in favour of maintaining "the fragility of those moments suspended in time, those memories whose function had been to leave behind nothing but memories." Marker's images are, on the one hand, a compilation of specific historical moments, yet by resisting a linear narrative *Sans Soleil* denies the viewer a sense of historical progress, instead leaving history open to be determined. This depiction of history as incomplete and undetermined is, for Lyotard, one of the significant political functions of sublime avant-garde art.

In 'Acinema' Lyotard critiques the capitalist imperative of mainstream cinema. He begins his discussion with the image of an imaginary film that all of a sudden cuts to an incongruous scene "lurching forth before your startled eyes." This "scene from elsewhere, representing nothing

identifiable” fails to relate to the logic of the shot or the film as a whole and so it is excluded in order to make the film accessible and thus profitable (1989a: 169-170). This act of selecting and eliminating “protect[s] the order of the whole (shot and/or sequence and/or film) while banning the intensity it carries” (Lyotard 1989a: 169-170). Lyotard is highly critical of such an approach to filmmaking, which seeks to create a consumable product that will attain value within the capitalist system of production. Against such an approach, Lyotard posits an Acinema, a form of avant-garde experimental filmmaking that resists totality through techniques that evoke something analogous to the sublime and aims to demonstrate that the world we live in and its history cannot be explained through rational systems or linear narratives.

Central to this approach is a transgressive use of cinematic time. In cinema produced within the capitalist economy, time is employed as a unifying or ordering force through the linear and causal development of narrative and plot, the repetition of patterns and motifs and a tight ordered diegesis (Lyotard 1989a: 172). In contrast, within avant-garde cinema, Lyotard insists that time must be employed as a discontinuous entity that creates intensity through periods of “immobility and excessive movement.” “In letting itself be drawn towards these antipodes” Lyotard argues, “the cinema insensibly ceases to be an ordering force; it produces true, that is, vain, simulacrum, blissful intensities, instead of productive/consumable objects” (1989a: 171-172).

In *Sans Soleil*, one of the primary ways in which Marker disrupts conventional filmmaking is through an unexpected use of cinematic time. The film’s edits, dissolves, montages and the varying lengths of the shots resist linearity or order and instead conform to the internal consciousness of the filmmaker who allows his own particular preoccupations and associations to structure the duration of the images and the logic of edits. Thus many of the film’s most significant and poignant images appear for only a few seconds while seemingly less important moments persist for a lengthy duration. For example, in a sequence depicting the neighbourhood celebrations in Tokyo, the viewer is exposed to the subjective temporality of the filmmaker who becomes intrigued by small details such as the intense expression of concentration on a dancer’s face and the movement of a dancer’s hands. In such instances the camera lingers on images for long periods of time simply for the sheer pleasure that their appearance holds for the cameraman. In the same sequence, unconnected brief shots intrude into the footage (a rowboat moving across an expanse of water, an emu, an African man dancing being filmed by a man with a camera), suggestive of the arbitrary associations and leaps in logic that take place in the mind of the filmmaker as a result of association via memory.

In a later sequence, dream, memory, fantasy and everyday life are intertwined as the cameraman recalls his dreams that take place in the labyrinthine tunnels that extend from Tokyo’s department stores. The enunciator reads from his letter:

*. . . the next day, when I'm awake, I realise that I continue to seek in the basement labyrinth the presence concealed the night before. I begin to wonder if these dreams are really mine, or if they are part of a totality, of a gigantic collective dream of which the entire city may be a projection.*

The following sequence depicts the commuters purchasing their tickets and boarding the train before delving into their individual and collective dreams, which take the form of fragments from Japanese television and horror films, images of desire and violence that are implanted within the collective unconscious. Here, as in many other sequences, the film comments on the mediating role of the media on our experiences, dreams and memories.

While the content of this sequence provides a critique of a media saturated culture, it is the formal characteristics that create a sublime experience for the viewer. As discussed above, for Lyotard, the sublime feeling may be produced in the cinema through the contrast of “extreme immobilization and extreme mobilization” (1989a: 177). The train sequence in *Sans Soleil* is a case in point that utilises a complex juxtaposition of immobility and movement. The scene that takes place inside the train is preceded by a series of shots in which a static camera films rapid movement, firstly of the commuters moving through the turn styles to board the train and inserting money into the ticket machines and then of the moving trains travelling from one side of the screen to the other. In both cases, the train journey is depicted as a metaphor for the cinematic experience; the commuters queue to buy their tickets that “grant them admission to the show” and the shots of the moving carriages emulate the succession of film frames moving through the projector. The footage of the commuters moving through the turn styles is fast paced and accompanied by an electronic sound track with a quick tempo. Similarly, the initial images of the moving trains are edited together with quick cuts that become increasingly more rapid. All of these elements contribute to a sense that these images are building towards some final explosive action.

However, Marker disrupts audience expectations of a climactic resolution by gradually reducing the pacing of the sequence. The static camera now moves with the train to reduce the speed and films the railway tracks slowly disappearing behind the train as it travels into the countryside. Once inside the carriage time is extended further as the camera lingers on the faces of the sleeping passengers, one by one, allowing the spectator to reflect upon each person's expressions and slight body movements. The camera hones in on small details such as the passengers hands, as in the footage of the neighbourhood celebrations. During the train sequence the voiceover is arrested and we hear only the sound of the train and an eerie distant musical score that creates a slow, consistent tempo. The impact of this sequence is strengthened by its positioning between an overwhelming excess of texts and images. The

sequence provides an important period of extended time to contemplate and reflect before the images from the Japanese horror films intervene in the form of sudden and fragmented “aberrant movements” (Lyotard 1989a: 172). The gradual introduction of these images emulates the increasing speed of a train as the edits become increasingly faster. Finally the train itself is transposed for an animated train illustrating the seamless fusion of reality and the media.

In the sequences of *Japan* Marker captures a sense of fragmentation and disarticulation through the clash of historical and contemporary inter-textual references. Japanese traditional rituals and ceremonies are shown to coexist with modern technologies and commodity culture: the white porcelain cat with its paw raised to salute the gods appears first in a cemetery where a couple have come to pray for their lost cat and later as a commodity on display in Tokyo’s department stores; the statue of Buddha is captured in the same shot as the city’s network of train lines that stand as a testament to industrial progress. Such sequences demonstrate the ambiguous relationship between the continuation of sacred traditions and the embrace of modernisation that seems to characterise contemporary Japan. These contrasting experiences of temporality in Japanese culture are effectively replicated for the viewer through the shifting and often unsettling temporal sequencing.

### **Indeterminacy and the Unpresentable**

In *Sans Soleil* the techniques of free association, inter-textuality and juxtaposition create a bleeding of meaning between images that undermines causal unity and prioritises incompleteness and ambiguity. Such techniques result in a fragmented, discontinuous and often disconcerting experience for the viewer. Indeed, Lyotard’s description, discussed earlier, of an imaginary film including scenes with “sudden incongruities,” “nothing identifiable” and “images from elsewhere” reads as an apt description of *Sans Soleil*, a film that refuses to conform to the consumerist logic of mainstream filmmaking. Marker’s radical disruption of conventional filmic techniques would account for some of the negative critical reception at the time of the film’s release; for example, Derek Elley wrote that “[A]ll too often the best of Marker’s thoughts (and his images) fly past in the general melee. . . he has yet to master the peaks and troughs of feature length” (quoted in Kear 1999[1984]: 45). However, for other critics, it was precisely Marker’s unconventional use of cinematic time that created a unique and powerful cinematic experience. Yvette Biro, for example, effectively articulates the viewer’s experience of *Sans Soleil* in language that resonates with the feeling of the sublime:

*In each moment there is a struggle: we try to preserve the experiences we have had, storing them in the fragile warehouse of our memory. However, the recordings we have fade too fast, losing their poignancy under the corrosion of time. But here exactly lies the triumphant paradox of Marker’s beautiful film. The mind might be*

*powerless in the unequal struggle with time, but not in revealing, forcefully, the story of that dramatic loss* (1984/85: 174).

As Biro suggests, the struggle to retain the images, words, ideas and our own intellectual thought processes while viewing *Sans Soleil* becomes impossible as the film's texts and images are often presented in rapid succession and without explanation. This impossibility is an integral part of the sublime experience as it produces both pain and pleasure; pain at our inability to comprehend the totality of our experience and at our own powerlessness to prevent the 'dramatic loss,' and pleasure in the sense of exhilaration that comes with pushing ones intellectual capacity to its limits.

In his essay entitled 'The Sublime and the Avant-Garde' (1989b [1984]), Lyotard writes of an agitation that occurs in the viewer when they make an aesthetic judgement, an experience that is both frustrating and pleasurable and concludes that "this agitation is only possible if something remains to be determined, something that hasn't yet been determined" (1989b: 197). The majority of sequences in *Sans Soleil* are invested with a considerable degree of indeterminacy in respect of time, place and identity, which challenges the viewer's ability to make determinate judgements. Further, the voiceover narration *fails* to justify the presence of the images or to account for the associations between them and even questions the nature and purpose of the project. By refusing to conform to a set of criteria by which it can be properly analysed and judged, *Sans Soleil* demands to be judged indeterminately. The viewer is thereby placed in a position in which their response is emotional rather than rational. Lyotard explains that in the case of avant-garde art:

*The art-lover does not experience a simple pleasure, or derive some ethical benefit from his contact with art, but expects an intensification of his conceptual and emotional capacity, an ambivalent enjoyment. Intensity is associated with an ontological dislocation. The art object no longer bends itself to models, but tries to present the fact that there is an unrepresentable.* (1989b: 206).

*Sans Soleil* produces "an intensification of [one's] conceptual and emotional capacity" by challenging the viewer's faculties of reason and understanding and gesturing to the unrepresentable. The experience of *Sans Soleil* remains largely ineffable, as language seems inadequate to express what the film is 'about.' Thus the film is experienced on an affective level that defies articulation.

In *The Differend*, Lyotard extends his discussion of the unrepresentable arguing that experimentation is the site of an effort to express that which resists the imposition of language. He writes, "in the differend, something "asks" to be put into phrases, and suffers the wrong of not being able to be put into phrases right away." Thus, Lyotard insists that that the artist must "recognize that what remains to



be phrased exceeds what they can presently phrase, and that they must be allowed to institute idioms that do not yet exist” (quoted in Slade 2007: 30). Andrew Slade explains:

*The aesthetic of the sublime, in a rudimentary sense, exposes the fundamental and irresolvable difference between knowing and feeling. That is, between knowing and feeling lies a differend that is felt as the pain of thinking coming up against its limits* (2007:20).

This effect of the differend is potentially felt numerous times during a viewing of *Sans Soleil*. The experience of “pain of thinking coming up against its limits” occurs as a result of the film’s overwhelming excess of texts and images that the mind cannot possibly assimilate and also in the exploration of concepts that contest the limits of intellectual reasoning. The cameraman frequently turns his attention to the existence of feelings and experiences that exceed the limits of representation, often remarking upon the gaps between his experiences of events and what appears in the image. For example, as he tries to film the market ladies in Bissau the voiceover remarks that the eye of the camera seems to be failing him. The presence of the camera inevitably alters the actions and responses of the women thus preventing unmediated representation. Connections are also drawn between the impossibility of representing certain experiences on film and one’s inability to adequately remember them; “How can one remember thirst?” the commentary questions before the images suddenly freeze upon an African woman in a rowing boat. In this moment memory and film are simultaneously arrested as though the filmmaker’s inability to remember thirst has brought the film’s images to an abrupt halt thus illustrating the impossibility of finding a visual equivalent for an unrepresentable feeling.

Towards the beginning of *Sans Soleil* the cameraman writes of Sei Shonagon, the Japanese lady-in-waiting to empress Sadako during Heian period at the end of the 10<sup>th</sup> century, and her penchant for writing lists (documented in *The Pillow Book*). By composing lists of “elegant things” or “distressing things,” Shonagon derived “melancholy comfort from the contemplation of the tiniest things.” The cameraman is attracted in particular to her “lists of things that quicken the heart,” which he says is “not a bad criterion I realise when I’m filming.” The cameraman’s approach to filming then, seeks to approximate the indescribable feelings that are created from the things that “one merely has to name,” to “quicken the heart.” For the cameraman these inexpressible moments are located firmly within the everyday, a realisation that further aligns the film with Lyotard’s understanding of the sublime.

For Lyotard, in postmodern artwork the sublime is no longer transcendent (as it was for Kant), but immanent; the sublime is located within the everyday rather than beyond it. The filmmaker of *Sans Soleil* is intensely fascinated by the minutia of everyday life, with the poignancy of transitory objects,

images and moments. Towards the start of the film, as we watch footage of the passengers on board the ferry to Hokkaido, the enunciator reads from one of the cameraman's letters:

*I've been around the world several times, and now only banality still interests me.*

*On this trip, I've tracked it with the relentlessness of a bounty hunter.*

Throughout the film, as the cameraman reveals his images of the everyday, he uncovers the extraordinary imbedded within the banal. Ordinary everyday moments are never self-contained or singular; they are invested with layers of history and memory and trigger both remembrances of the past and imaginings of the future. For example, the sleeping passengers on the ferry to Hokkaido remind the cameraman of "a past or future war." As his camera focuses on the limbs of the passenger's bodies he recognises the "small fragments of war enshrined in everyday life." The images are permitted to resonate suggestively beyond their immediate connotations. Just as the train footage becomes a journey into unconscious desire, the ferry is imagined as a fall-out shelter. In his engagement with everyday 'banality,' the cameraman explores the intangible and inexpressible aspects of human experience that point to the limits of understanding, language and representation.

The cameraman's 'friend' Hayao Yamaneko provides another solution to the impossibility of representing memory and history: "if the images of the present don't change, then change the images of the past." Yamaneko manipulates filmed images in his video synthesiser giving them new meaning and further displacing them from their historical and cultural contexts. He names the digital space of his synthesised images, the 'Zone', a homage to Andrei Tarkovsky's *Stalker* (1979). While Hayao Yamaneko and the cameraman, Sandor Krasna, are both, in one sense, constructions or alter-egos of Chris Marker, they are better read as distinct characters as they maintain different discursive positions on the functions of memory and representation. The distinction between these two central 'characters' and their alternate aesthetic approaches to the representation of memory can be further understood through the distinction between the modern and the postmodern sublime.

### **The Modern and Postmodern Sublime**

In 'An Answer to the Question, What is the Postmodern' (1992 [1982]) Lyotard suggests that the sublime can be evoked in two distinct ways, one of which is termed modern and other postmodern. Lyotard is quick to point out, however, that these modes often coexist within the same work of art (1992: 13). For Lyotard the postmodern is not that which comes after the modern, rather the postmodern is "undoubtedly part of the modern" (1992: 12); it is the experimental impulse within the avant-garde that exists in a nascent and recurrent state within modernism (1992: 13). The modern and postmodern modes of the sublime essentially attest to "a differend between regret and

experimentation” (1992: 13). With the feeling of the modern sublime the subject becomes aware of the “inadequacy of the faculty of presentation” and experiences a sense of “nostalgia for presence” (1992: 13). The modern sublime produces a melancholic fixation on the past while enabling one to maintain a belief in the possibility of recuperating and redeeming history. Despite the feeling of loss at the inability to present the world adequately, the modern sublime offers a sense of consolation and solace in the midst of pain. However whilst the modern sublime “allows the unrepresentable to be invoked only as absent content,” Lyotard argues that the postmodern work of art “invokes the unrepresentable in presentation itself” (Lyotard 1992: 14-15). With the experience of the postmodern sublime a sense of jubilation comes from inventing new rules of the game (1992:13). These two alternate modes of the sublime co-exist in *Sans Soleil* through the contrasting ideas and aesthetics of Krasna and Yamaneko.

Krasna frequently betrays a nostalgic and melancholic relation to the past and a belief that memory may work to restore that past. While he is aware of the illusory nature of memory, that “we re-write memory as history is rewritten,” Krasna is nevertheless in search of a lost past. He conveys a faith in the ability for sensory experience to recover a dormant memory (however falsified), in a similar manner to Proust. The memories of the cameraman are always depicted as inseparable from the medium of film that is used to record them; he writes:

*I remember that month of January in Tokyo, or rather, I remember the images I filmed of that month of January in Tokyo. They have substituted themselves for my memory, they are my memory. I wonder how people remember things who don't film, don't photograph, don't tape.*

Krasna uses the images he has filmed as visual triggers to access his memories, such as his “image of happiness,” the three children on a road in Iceland. This sublime image produces a sense of pain and loss due to its referencing of the lost object (happiness), yet it also produces a sense of solace, even redemption. For this reason he “held it at arms length, at zooms length” and tried to link to other images even though it never worked.

The image of the Icelandic children invokes a sense of the unrepresentable as absent content; the cameraman cannot say *why* for him it is the image of happiness and yet the viewer gets a sense of *why* nevertheless. The image is inherently nostalgic and, despite the presence of the sublime, it offers the spectator “material for consolation and pleasure” (Lyotard 1992: 14). I believe that this image permits what Lyotard describes as “a common experience of nostalgia for the impossible” (1992: 15), associated with the modern sublime. The nostalgic nature of the image is enhanced by the fact that it is repeated twice in the film. The viewer is permitted to return to the image in the same way that Krasna does and to reassess the image and its meaning. The first time we see the footage of the children

before the opening credits it is as memory fragment displaced from time, place or history. When the footage returns later in the film it is with subtle differences as though memory has altered the image. Now the footage is extended to include an ending with a shaky frame trembling due to the impact of the wind.

Following the return of the image of the children in Iceland, the commentary reveals that five years later a volcano on the island erupted and the village was partially obliterated and covered in lava and ashes. The images cut to Haroun Tazieff's footage of the volcano shot in 1970. The volcanic obliteration of the town in which the Icelandic children lived is presented as a metaphorical equivalent to the black leader in the film's opening. The volcanic ashes reduce the village to 'nothing' enhancing the significance of the initial image. Significantly, Krasna's remembrance of these images takes place in yet another place and time and is prompted by a Japanese Shinto blessing that first celebrates objects before they are set alight and reduced to ashes. The blessing attributes immortality to the objects before they are burned and the ritual is seen as a celebration of eternal life rather than one of destruction. The juxtaposition of these sequences implies that the image of the Icelandic children can be read in a similar way. The film first celebrates the image as one of happiness before revealing the eruption of the volcano. The images have become immortal only following the destruction; the obliteration of the town has imbued the image with a sense of timelessness and eternity.

The image of the children in Iceland undoubtedly evokes the modern sublime in that it allows the unrepresentable to be put forward 'as missing contents' and Krasna's attachment to this image serves to align his character's approach to memory with the modern sublime. In contrast, Yamaneko believes that memory needs to be re-written for the needs of the present and the future. Yameneko holds no nostalgia or reverence for a lost past, rather, his images evoke the sense of jubilation that comes from inventing new modes of representing history. As outlined above, while the modern sublime is linked to the feeling of loss, the postmodern sublime produces a sense of excitement by disrupting established representational structures. Simon Malpas claims:

*The postmodern sublime works through a sense of excitement at the failure of language games . . . conception runs ahead of presentation, as the collapsing structure of the realism challenged by the work of art indicates the possibility of a new, different, 'inhuman' way of experiencing and thinking about the world (2003: 48).*

Hayao Yamaneko's 'Zone' attests to the existence of the unrepresentable, not as something missing from the content of the image, but as a force within representation that dramatically challenges traditional ways of representing the history and memory. The Zone enacts a ritual destruction and deconstruction

of the images in order to break the rules, challenge established codes of filmic representation and invent new idioms. The non-representational strategies employed by Yamaneko stand in contrast to mimetic representations of the world and work to transform mimetic representations into mutable and solarised images of pure colour, shape and movement. By capturing a sense of otherness, the Zone opens up a new 'inhuman' way of representing and experiencing the world.

According to Lyotard, postmodern artworks are disorienting because they shatter established artistic structures, undermine viewer expectations and analytic categories and raise the question 'what is art:'

[The postmodern] *refuses the consolation of correct forms, refuses the consensus of taste permitting a common experience of nostalgia for the impossible, and inquires into new presentations – not to take pleasure in them, but to better produce the feeling that there is something unrepresentable* (1992:15).

The distinction between the modern and postmodern sublime then is largely a formal one. Where the modern sublime supplies fragmented matter with a sense of harmony through form, the postmodern sublime resists formal unity altogether and presents matter as undetermined and incomplete. The ultimate mode of postmodern expression for Lyotard is pure abstraction. The postmodern sublime Lyotard argues "will be "blank" [*blanche*] like one of Malevich's squares: it will make one see only by prohibiting one from seeing; it will give pleasure only by giving pain" (1992:11). Here Lyotard refers to Kasimir Malevich's painting 'white on white' (1918), which depicts a white square on a white background making it impossible to see anything. Similarly, the digitised images in the Zone are not entirely legible, the electronic texture deforms them making them almost impossible to see. As the images morph and mutate they remain in a constant state of becoming and refuse to be finalised. They effectively produce the feeling that there is something unrepresentable within images themselves. As Jon Kear argues, the Zone "becomes the vehicle both for expressing the limits of representation, and for alluding to a reality that exceeds visible appearances" (1999: 35).

The capacity for the Zone to present the unrepresentable imbues it with a political function. At one stage in the film the Zone images depict the *burakamin*, the lowest rank of the Japanese caste system. The voiceover states:

*How can one claim to show a category of Japanese who do not exist? . . . their real name, Etas, is a taboo word, not to be pronounced. They are non-persons, how can they be shown, except as non-images?*

Through the presentation of 'non-images,' the Zone is capable of depicting that which does not exist in

official history and cannot be expressed in language. It offers subversive potential by giving a kind of non-visible 'visibility' to the silenced and repressed aspects of Japanese culture and history. In another sequence, the Zone depicts scenes showing the Kamikaze pilots preparing for a mission while the voiceover relays the ambivalent thoughts contained in a letter from one of the pilots. Instead of dismissing the pilots as fanatics, this sequence gives voice to the complexities and ambiguities of the pilot's actions and emotions that were suppressed in the publicised historical accounts. In such sequences the Zone is aligned with the subversive power of personal memory to act as a counter-discourse to official history. The images, once imbued with the electronic texture of the digital synthesiser, can no longer proclaim themselves to be factual and unmediated documents of history. Rather, they take on the appearance of subjective memories that with time have become distorted and coloured. For this reason Yamaneko "claims that electronic texture is the only one that can deal with sentiment, memory and imagination."

The images fed through the Zone take on new meanings and encourage the viewer to question the authenticity of the original image. The digitised images are presented as more truthful than the illusory and misleading images of film and photography; according to Yamaneko the manipulated pictures are "less deceptive . . . than those you see on television. At least they proclaim themselves to be what they are: images - not the portable and compact form of an already inaccessible reality." Once synthesised through the Zone, the images can more accurately illustrate the effects of time; they take the form of memories, which perpetually shape and reshape past experiences. As they enter the Zone the images transform in front of our eyes just as memories are shifting, fictionalised and falsified representations of the past.

Finally Krasna's own images enter the Zone and we see the return of the cameraman's images filtered through the digital synthesiser. This transference of Krasna's film footage into the Zone marks its transcendence to a new order of representation and a shift from the modern to the postmodern sublime. In the Zone, the cameraman's images take on the timeless quality that the Zone bestows upon all images with equality. Krasna's willingness to relinquish his images to the avenging power of the Zone also perhaps suggests a shift in his own approach to the representation of memory. By providing multiple 'characters' who offer alternate approaches to the representation of memory and history, Marker resists advocating any one representational strategy. While for Yamaneko the Zone provides a 'solution' to the problem of representation and memory, Krasna and Marker remain more ambivalent. The Zone is thus presented not as the ultimate solution, but as one possible method that has both problems and advantages.

*Sans Soleil* continually interrogates its own modes of representation and endlessly poses questions including what *is* film and what is *this* film. Following the initial shots of the Icelandic Children, the

black leader and the warplane, the enunciator says, 'He wrote me: One day I'll have to put it all alone at the beginning of a film.' Later he writes of an 'imaginary film,' a future film which is to be called 'Sunless' ('Sans Soleil'), the title of a song cycle by Moussorgski. For the filmmaker the song captured "the presence of that thing he didn't understand which has something to do with unhappiness and memory." Again here, the film evokes the modern sublime attesting to an incomprehensible and inexpressible absence and the link between memory and a feeling of nostalgic melancholy is rearticulated. The choice of the title 'Sunless' reflects the cameraman's own feeling of melancholic loss that inevitably accompanies his process of remembering, and at the same time his feelings of pleasure and solace at being able to perceive the existence of memory.

The sequence concludes with the cameraman's statement: "of course I'll never make that film," a statement that further complicates our understanding of the film's ontological status as well as its location in time. Though articulated in the present tense, it is possible that the statement was made in the past: that now the film has been made and we are watching it. However, a reading of the statement in relation to the sublime suggests that the phrase is best understood in the future-perfect tense. The words "of course" imply that not only will the film never be made but that it would be impossible to make it. This impossibility of bringing the imaginary film into representation means that it can only be inferred through indirect means. Thus, although he cannot make the film, the cameraman ironically states, "Nonetheless, I'm collecting the sets, inventing the twists, putting in my favourite creatures." This passage implies that the film cannot exist as a complete totality but only as a collection of incomplete fragments. The status of the film is therefore indeterminate and contingent; it could be reconstructed in a multitude of different ways. The temporal location of the film is also problematised; it cannot exist entirely in the past or in the present because it remains always in the process of becoming. While the film cannot exist as a complete entity, however, by providing us with his collection of fragmented images, Marker enables the viewer to gain some understanding of the imagined film despite its absence. Thus in accordance with Lyotard's postmodern sublime Marker effectively "invokes the unrepresentable in presentation itself" (1992: 15).

The sense of indeterminacy and incompleteness evoked throughout *Sans Soleil* is enhanced by the film's final sequences in which the cameraman's images enter the Zone. The images are deprived of any claim to authenticity as they are shown to be "already affected by the moss of Time, freed from the lie that had prolonged the existence of those moments swallowed by the spiral." The Zone, as discussed, opens up the images to new interpretations thus disrupting the viewer's process of making meaning and refusing narrative resolution. For Lyotard the problem with mainstream "cinematic movements" is that they "generally follow the figure of the return, that is, of the repetition and propagation of sameness. In this regard all endings are happy endings, just by being endings" (1989a: 173). In *Sans Soleil*, however, formal structures of repetition are disregarded in favour of disjunction

and open-endedness. The lack of resolution means that the excess of the film spills over into the viewer's everyday world. *Sans Soleil* refuses to provide an ending as such. While the film cuts to black and the credits roll, there is no sense of narrative or formal resolution and the questions raised remain unanswered. In fact, the final moments of the film present the spectator with yet another question, "will there ever be another letter" thus leaving the film perpetually incomplete.

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## Crossing Chris: Some Markerian Affinities

Author: Adrian Martin

**Abstract (E):** This essay creatively explores a group of artists, writers, and other special individuals whose work or life story can be described as having an intriguing affinity with the protean career of Chris Marker. Avoiding the ‘usual suspects’ (such as Godard or Sebald), it discusses gossip columnist Milt Machlin, record collector Harry Smith, painter Gianfranco Baruchello, writer-filmmaker Edgardo Cozarinsky, and several others. From this constellation, a particular view of Markerian poetics emerges, touching upon the meanings of anonymity, storytelling, history and archiving.

**Abstract (F):** Cet essai brosse de manière créative un groupe d'artistes, d'écrivains et d'autres personnes particulières dont le travail ou la biographie peuvent être décrits comme montrant une étrange mais certaine connivence avec la carrière protéiforme de Chris Marker. Evitant les lieux communs (comme Godard ou Sebald), cet article trace le pigiste Milt Machlin, le collectionneur de disques Harry Smith, le peintre Gianfranco Baruchello, l'écrivain et cinéaste Edgardo Cozarinsky, et quelques autres. De cette nébuleuse, émerge une vision particulière de la poétique markérienne, en rapport avec les significations de l'anonymat, de la narration, de l'histoire et du travail de mémoire.

**keywords:** Biography, anonymity, archive, quotation, history, Chris Marker.

### Article

*I trust, too, that there is something promising in this strangeness,  
for where but in the most overlooked corners,  
and in the briefest moments,  
does one expect to find something like the past?*  
– Alexander Nemerov (11-12)

An intriguing obituary appeared in some newspapers around the world in early 2007. In the Australian newspaper where I stumbled upon it, the editorial title was “Spook spoke more than 50 languages”. The notice was about a man named George Leoni Chestnut, “a spy by day and translator of Biblical Greek by night”, dead at 89. Beyond his extraordinary career as a translator – compiling Serbian and Afghan dictionaries, rendering children’s poetry from Chinese into English and Spanish, and producing Biblical texts in Dinka, the language of southern Sudan – Chestnut worked for more than thirty years as a “civilian director of the analytic section” of the National Security Agency. The obituary contains this anecdote:

Although he never discussed his work at the NSA, family members could often determine how things were going in Czechoslovakia or other world hot spots by how many Bach cantatas Chestnut played when he came home at night. A three-sonata night meant a crisis somewhere.

Most of us are likely never to encounter anything more about George Leoni Chestnut than what is recorded in this story. His life – already so covered over with secrecy – exists for us only in this flash, this scrap rising up from the ceaseless, churning oblivion of news-media biography. Yet, by the same token, I will probably never forget this beautifully dramatic/cinematic formula for the intersection of art, life and politics: “A three-sonata night meant a crisis somewhere”.

All things considered – and government espionage set aside – the fleeting, condensed life-story of George Chestnut sets me thinking about Chris Marker. Something that is rarely said about his films, videos and installations is that they each seem to be many works compacted into one, a collage of notes, anecdotes and projects through which Marker has managed, miraculously, perhaps by chance or impulsiveness, to draw the provisional, connecting line. How often I have watched some television or cinema documentary – ninety minutes or two hours broiling over one topic, one place, one person – and thought: Marker could have got that down into a crisp ten-minute vignette in the midst of some unexpected mosaic (or better, *constellation*). An example would be the Australian documentary *Eternity* (Lawrence Johnston, 1994), about Arthur Stace, the mysterious man who elegantly chalked the word ‘Eternity’ on every available street surface in his hometown of Sydney – a little, indeed, like the smiling ‘Mister Cat’ stencilled enigmatically everywhere above Paris rooftops (and in cyberspace), bearing his enigmatic message of playful hope, in Marker’s *The Case of the Grinning Cat* (2004).

There is a democratic sense in Marker’s work that everyone deserves to have their story told, even if it is in the condensed form of such a flash – or *illumination*, as Walter Benjamin would have called it. As Marker drolly observed in 2003: “That the unknown writer and the brilliant musician have the right to the same consideration as the corner storekeeper may be too much to ask”(39). Much has been made, in vexed biographical speculations down the decades, about Marker’s penchant for secrecy, his playful fake names, the paucity of photographs of him, and so on. Beyond any personal issues, however, this fog is strategic: Marker wishes to place himself at the level of every ordinary, more or less nameless-faceless person, the kind of citizen who may pierce public consciousness for only a brief moment – that is, if someone else (in most cases) bears the responsibility of artfully compressing and transmitting their tale in a lively, witty way. Marker’s art depends on *anonymity* – only secondarily his own anonymity, but rather the anonymity of most of us; precisely that Prufrockian pathos that comes down to us in the poetry of T.S. Eliot, which is the spur and subject of the installation *Owls at Noon Prelude* (2005).

As with the case of George Chestnut, Marker's work has become inextricably reflected, for me, in a colourful little paperback about the history of tabloid journalism, deleted copies of which once flooded the secondhand bookstores that I haunted during the late 1970s. *Gossip Wars: An Exposé of the Scandal Era* is by Milt Machlin (died 2004), whose surprising bio-note itself has the contours of a Markerian vignette: served in the Pacific theatre during World War II, graduated from Brown University and attended the Sorbonne, studying in the Cœur de Civilisation; editor of *Argosy* magazine and author of numerous books (fiction and nonfiction) about crime, international politics, the laying of pipes, the Holy Land... and the history of scandal and rumour-mongering. *Gossip Wars* is a book filled to bursting with ultra-short accounts of briefly memorable individuals – almost a pop-trash equivalent to Michel Foucault's poignant archival project (also very Markerian) called *The Life of Infamous Men*, which aimed to collect the single, fleeting traces, in some bland legal or bureaucratic document, of the dramas of otherwise unremarked-on, unrecorded ordinary lives. "What shall be read here is not a collection of portraits", wrote Foucault. "They are snares, weapons, cries, gestures, attitudes, ruses, intrigues for which words have been the instruments. Real lives have been 'played out' in these few sentences..." (78-79).

In *Gossip Wars*, there is one such story about a workaholic freelancer who, like so many who toiled in this journalistic field, wrote anonymously, with no byline (as did, years later in the context of '60s *Time* and *Newsweek* journalism, another famous recluse: Terrence Malick.) This particular writer, who filed his gossip scoops furiously, hit upon a novel way of immortalising himself, even if no reader ever knew how to read his graffiti-like gesture: he would somehow work in, quite meaninglessly, his own name, in the course of some quoted rhetorical flourish, or curse.

The poetic charge of Marker's art has much to do with what turns up, for a moment, from the anonymous flux of social information and rumour: a story, a face, a single photographic frame. His own profuse creativity of framing and recording deliberately confuses itself (like Orson Welles' in *F for Fake* [1974]) with the seeming proliferation of 'samples', quotes, found objects from another's hand (as in *Remembrance of Things to Come*, 2001) or no one's hand: anonymous art, provenance lost, no signature. This is explicitly the data-bank supporting *Owls at Noon*, as he described the project in 2005: "Objects, images that don't belong, and yet are there. Leaflets, postcards, stamps, graffiti, forgotten photographs, frames stolen from the continuous and senseless flow of TV stuff". In Marker, this work of collecting, sifting and connecting fragments is a specific work of memory (or 'immemory'), and of how remembered time constructs what he calls a "subjective journey", within and against a more massive, official History.

Marker, however, takes that textbook timeline seriously as well. This much is clear from his incessant pondering of "the generation that rose with the great wave of 1917" (as he wrote in the 1997 postscript

to his 1959 collection *Coréens*) – this fabulously idealist but “tragic generation” of, for instance, Soviet director Alexander Medvedkin, to whom Marker devoted several films including his epic *The Last Bolshevik* (1993) – and its difference to his generation, “born on the other side of the black hole”, who “cannot ignore the depth of its failure”, and must obsessively bear the responsibility of bringing the dreams of the socialist and capitalist Utopias, alike, to account. As Ross Gibson, the noted Marker specialist from Australia, once remarked: Marker, now 88, can lay claim (whether he likes it or not) to some “serious history” (60).

This essay is an exercise in drawing Markerian affinities. This means neither those who influenced Marker (from Jean Giraudoux to Jean Cocteau), nor those whom he has come to influence (from Jean-Pierre Gorin to Jem Cohen). Rather, it means those whose thought processes and working methods come close, in some (perhaps odd) way, to Marker’s. Every artist seeks precisely these affinities – according to a logic which can be quite secretive and mysterious – in order to nourish his or her own work, expand his or her own universe; we could call such affinities ‘spiritual’, if we agree, for this moment, to purge from the word any religious connotation. Some Markerian affinities are already well-worn in the burgeoning critical literature: Marker and Jean-Luc Godard, Marker and Walter Benjamin, Marker and W.G. Sebald. But we can be still more inventive in the lines we draw, the connections we make. Marker himself surprises us, all the time, with such connections – to high art, popular culture, *fait divers*, personal encounters. Can we manage to surprise him, with some entirely unexpected shadow of his creativity in a totally foreign domain? Then again, we would have to end up asking what, indeed, is foreign to the imaginary universe of Marker, what could count as its inside and its outside, its borders? As he remarked in 2009, in the course of his cyber-adventures in the ‘Second Life’ realm (accessible at <[secondlife.com](http://secondlife.com)>): “I chose a pseudonym, Chris Marker, that is easy to pronounce in most languages because I intended to travel. You need search no further than that”.

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Time and Memory: this couplet governs at least a hundred scholarly commentaries on Marker’s best-known film works, *La Jetée* (1962) and *Sunless* (1983), as well as the interactive archive which bears the title of *Immemory* (1997). Actually, we may need to restore to these words some of J. Alfred Prufrock’s classic banality: both time and memory are, in one sense, bland, unremarkable phenomena; time flows by, and recall is inevitable, for all of us. Time-and-memory is, in itself, no magic formula for art-making – as a mountain of banal contemporary art attests. But Marker’s art reaches for the poetic (even Utopian) moment when time and memory become, precisely, *inventive*: when time doubles back or springs forward, layering itself; and when memory creates a living (rather than dead) archive, and a collective connection. Hence his fondness for temporal paradox, as in the primal, disquieting plot of a child witnessing his own death in *La Jetée*, or the proleptic, prophetic visions

recorded by Denise Bellon's photographs of the Surrealists in *Remembrance of Things to Come*. This is what Gorin means when (in a video extra on the 2003 Criterion DVD of *Sunless* and *La Jetée*) he speaks of Marker's relation to his own life as a scientist working a time machine; he is both close and distant from his own experience, and can portray or explore himself as someone who (in the words of Gianfranco Baruchello – to whom we shall soon return – describing Marcel Duchamp as a time machine) “ignored some kinds of changes in the world and perhaps accelerated others” (35).

What is Marker's work of memory? Again confusing what he himself shoots (“images taken apparently at random”) with what he collects (“from every country I visit I return with postcards, newspaper cuttings and posters which I tear off walls”), Marker in 1998 reflected on the life-long creative project of a catalogue of images. He presents his “subjective journey through the Twentieth Century” as a characteristically modest “small study of classification of my archive of images”. And he concludes: “I am sure if I study my documents systematically, I shall find, hidden in that disorder, a secret map, like the map of the treasure in a tale of pirates” (150).

“Any reasonably long memory (like every collection) is more structured than it seems at first sight”, wrote Marker in the same text (150). On this level, the free associations that structure Marker's work resonate with the artistic practice of Italy's Gianfranco Baruchello, as traced in his protean projects in many media (drawing, painting, sculpture, filmmaking, farming) and expressed in his remarkable book *Why Duchamp*. All of Baruchello's works and reflections take the form of an almost Surrealist juxtaposition. He works with elaborate, unruly files, gathered over many decades, covering the most disparate topics: feminism, agricultural tools, the class struggle... Another obsessive collector of everyday fragments, Baruchello summed up, in *Why Duchamp*, the purpose of his quest in this way: to place his objects side by side – simply set them in some kind of loose but charged relation – in order to one day find “the secret of what all of them can mean together” (38). This is something like the years it takes for a psychoanalytic free association to eventually form some pattern, reveal some logic – and, until that moment, one must pursue, armed with all the fragments, the poetic art of setting side by side, the building of fragile bridges, the forming of striking shapes.

Let us return to the category of anonymous art – and the project of time as rendered by another great photographic artist, Walker Evans. In her superb 1995 biography of Evans, Belinda Rathbone emphasises the significance of all the anonymous art forms that he assiduously collected and cultivated: everything from unsigned letters and postcards to cigar-box art and freight-car emblems. This practice often took precedence over the artist's conventionally ‘creative’ output, which was relatively slim in terms of books and exhibitions. Evans, in a sense, ended exactly where Marker began: with the art of graphic editing and lay-out of pictures and text in juxtaposition, at *Fortune* magazine in Evans' case, at the publishing house Seuil in Marker's. But aren't contemporary digital,

computer-based, multi-media art projects (Marker's included), with their sampling and treating, really an update on such revolutionary design projects of the Twentieth Century?

Evans, like Marker, also developed a specific attitude towards time, memory and history: while being contemptuous of nostalgia (the kind that gushes over, as George Alexander once memorably put it, "the price of milk fifty years ago" [12]), he nonetheless sought to *freeze*, through obsessive and stately image-documentation, a certain period, a certain sensibility, which he felt to be imperiled, on the verge of passing away ("Before They Disappear" was the title of one of his magazine features). In fact, when Evans framed the scenes of his present day through his camera lens, he wanted to fix each thing "as it might be seen at some future date" (247), that is, how subsequent generations would see and remember the significance of that era. Another kind of 'remembrance of things to come', another ghostly, uncanny layering... This is the kind of cultural work which today's students associate more readily with Walter Benjamin and his *Arcades Project*. Benjamin, Evans and Marker are all alike in their attachment to 'their time' – which happens, as for all of us, to be the time of their youth – as well as their conviction that the lesson of this time is about to pass into oblivion ("then will a whole world of cherished association have been destroyed", wrote Walker [227]), and that its essence can best be caught by netting the tiniest and seemingly most banal traces of the period's ephemeral manufactured culture, its matchboxes and beer coasters and nightclub handbills...

So let us add another name, another very Markerian figure, to this rhizomatic list of affinities: experimental animator and wild musicologist Harry Smith, who (as Paola Iglioni's heartbreaking 2001 documentary *American Magus* records) suffered the agony of his lifelong, uncatalogued ephemera collection being taken to the tip by a disgruntled landlord. And yet Smith also lived long enough (as he said on stage at the Grammys, in a clip used by Iglioni) to see his famous curated selection of eccentric American folk music recordings "change the world". That, too, is the Utopian dream that gives Marker's work its finest, most lyrical and moving flights of fancy: when a morsel of poetry or whimsy, a 'cat listening to music' (the title of a short 1993 video, inserted as an *entr'acte* in the original television broadcasts of *The Last Bolshevik*) or a sudden delightful or surprising conjunction of images and sounds, can change the world... These are just the sort of "little personal October Revolutions" celebrated by Baruchello, "something really eternal, at least as material and stimulus for reflection" (41).

Marker has expressed his fondness for the work of another border-crossing essayist-filmmaker, Argentine-born Edgardo Cozarinsky, specifically the 2001 story collection *The Bride from Odessa*. In Marker and Cozarinsky (whose films include *One Man's War* [1982] and *Citizen Langlois* [1994], and whose other books include *The Moldavian Pimp* [2004] and *Tres fronteras* [2006]), we find a very similar conception of what it means to represent, and comment upon, history – in both its social and

personal forms. And in particular, what it means to fashion a narration (in the broadest sense of the term) from the scattered, archival materials of history: a story, anecdote, vignette, telling connection, or surprising epiphany. In the story “Christmas ‘54” from *The Bride from Odessa*, Cozarinsky writes:

This story has no plot, other than that of History itself. It is barely more than the impression left by an instant, a spark produced by two very different surfaces rubbing together. (101)

Marker and Cozarinsky may love the grand traditions of storytelling but, in their own works, they shy away from full-blooded fiction, and usually prefer to dwell (like their contemporaries Harun Farocki in Germany and Jean-Pierre Gorin in the US) amidst the many possibilities of the loose essay-documentary form. Sticking close to the facts and traces of history – which they happily embroider with myriad imaginative speculations, metaphors and puns – they require only the merest spark of a fictional intrigue: a chance encounter, a momentary crossing of two life-trajectories, a street poster glimpsed, a song overheard... Both filmmakers hold, in this sense, to what the Argentine theatre creator Vivi Tellas (with whom, in recent years, Cozarinsky has collaborated) calls the ‘Minimal Threshold of Fiction’ (Umbral Mínimo de Ficción, or UMF), a condition most suitable to the interweaving of fact and fancy, autobiography and narration. “My premise is that every person has, and is, an archive, a reserve of experiences, knowledge, texts, images”, Tellas has stated. She “adds nothing” to the personal worlds or archives she puts on stage; she does not “produce” but “postproduces” them, treating them like “surrealist *objets trouvés* or Duchamp’s ready-mades”.

Cozarinsky, too, postproduces his characters and plotlines. Another story by Cozarinsky from *The Bride from Odessa*, “Days of 1937”, presents the tale of its central character’s curious death as a secret allegory of the art of turning history into a narration, or an essay. At its conclusion, it conjures the possibility that there comes into being, at the moment of a person’s ‘passing over’ to the other side,

like islands floating in a nighttime sea, fragments of awareness, memories, voices and images, remnants of the gradually dimming existence, temporary baggage the traveller clings onto for a brief but imprecise length of time that our instruments cannot register. [...] Perhaps all that clings to [those islands] is flotsam from a shipwreck. It would be useless to expect that these scraps, which crumble even as we name them, could provide us with a portrait of the person crossing the divide. Perhaps it is only precisely as shards that they can catch the attention of any improbable observer who stumbles across them: their condition as brief fragments of a truncated story, the random pieces of a jigsaw that will never now be completed. (62-63)

In this allegory, the historian-storyteller is the ‘improbable observer’ who tries to pull together the mute, often seemingly meaningless traces of the past. Marker’s powerful installation *The Hollow Men*



– revisiting the historical life-span that begins (as Raymond Bellour reminds us in his essay “Marker’s Gesture”) with the First World War that profoundly touched the artist’s childhood, with T.S. Eliot’s poem, suitably fragmented, as an aid – throws up deliberately ‘corrupted’ documents, undated and unidentified, that are endlessly reshuffled in the digitally programmed combinatorial system of the piece. (As usual, Marker uses the simplest computer technology available.) One feels while watching it (in an appropriately darkened space and with Toru Takemitsu’s “Corona” for piano echoing loudly) that anything, grabbed from any time or place, could be made to signify World War I in this work – and, conversely, that all the time-bound signs of this terrible event stand a chance of being freed into our present-day cyber-ether. Today, as I write this piece, Marker is taking this liberation of his ‘immemorial archive’ still further in his Second Life interventions.

A final association. It seems like a joke, but it is not: Chris Marker and Alain Resnais, two old pals of the pre-Nouvelle Vague Left Bank group of filmmakers, are today great fans of certain very slick American TV shows. Where Resnais’ taste runs to *Millennium* (1996-9) and *The X Files* (1993-2002), Marker goes for the likes of *The Practice* (1997-2004), *Deadwood* (2004-6), *Firefly* (2002-3) and *The Wire* (2002-8). The maker of *La Jetée* and *Level Five* (1997) sets us straight:

I feed my hunger for fiction with what is by far the most accomplished source: those great American TV series... There is a knowledge in them, a sense of story and economy, of ellipsis, a science of framing and of cutting, a dramaturgy, and an acting style that has no equal anywhere, and certainly not in Hollywood. (2003: 37)

Two men in their eighties, watching their favourite series on DVD sets and computer monitors, in their separate homes, just as once they watched certain Hollywood musicals (*An American in Paris* is remembered) together in London, during their collaboration on *Statues Also Die* (1952). In Resnais’ lovely 1956 essay-doco about the Bibliothèque Nationale, *All The Memory of the World* (which contains the immortal credit to ‘Chris and Magic Marker’, no doubt for the use of his ‘Petite Planète’ travel guide to Mars!), there is a moment which is in fact pure musical, pure Kelly/Donen/Clair/Lubitsch: three workmen deliver the day’s journals to the library, marching in synchronised steps... But what is there in these modern American fictions of gruesome death and forensic detection, alien invasion and paranoid conspiracy, that attracts our two Eternal Modernists?

The American television program that makes me flash onto Marker the most is *Crossing Jordan* (2001-7), about the investigative work of autopsy experts in a city morgue. Like many shows of its ilk – about profilers, vice cops, psychic detectives – *Crossing Jordan* often builds to grand dramatic recreations of crime or murder scenes that are in fact more like visionary projections: our inquiring heroes suddenly walk around inside images of the imagined past, sometimes magically animating still

photos, computer schematics or police sketches in order to do so. This is interesting enough already as a cultural phantasm, but *Crossing Jordan*, in particular, brings this taste for revivification, this remembrance of things past or ‘time re-edited’ (as *The Case of the Grinning Cat* puts it) to an especially urgent and poignant point. So many of its plotlines, large or small, are precisely about reconstructing, in a flash, the life-stories of largely anonymous people: children, the homeless, loners, ordinary folks either below the radar or entirely off the map of society’s record of itself. And the flash that matters most, the pivotal moment for *Crossing Jordan*, is the exact moment of death: how someone fell, was hit or shot, how long their body has been left to decompose; and what history can be read once the body is scanned for its surface marks and then opened up to its archaeological and geological levels of trace-experiences...

Is this so far from Marker’s own poetic-political project as he described it in 2005, of “bringing into the light events and people who normally never access it”?

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## Petit Cinéma of the World or the Mysteries of Chris Marker

Author: Susana S. Martins

**Abstract (E):** From 1954 to 1958, Chris Marker edited the travel books series *Petite Planète*, providing an alternative to more conventional guidebooks. The aim of this article is to pay special attention to the photographic dimension of these books, particularly in their essayistic composition. Starting from the concrete analysis of a short photo-sequence included in the book on Portugal, I propose here to investigate the central role of the ‘essay’ in the work of Chris Marker, not only as an aesthetical choice but fundamentally as a privileged form of political commitment.

**Abstract (F):** De 1954 à 1958, Chris Marker fut rédacteur de la collection de livres de voyage *Petite Planète*, qui offrait une alternative aux guides de voyage plus classiques. Cet article vise à accorder une attention toute particulière à l’aspect photographique de ces livres, et plus spécialement à leur composition essayistique. A partir de l’analyse spécifique d’une courte série de photographies incluse dans le livre sur le Portugal, je propose d’examiner le rôle central de l’essai dans l’œuvre de Chris Marker, non seulement comme parti pris esthétique, mais plus encore comme forme privilégiée d’engagement politique.

**keywords:** *Petite Planète*, Chris Marker, travel, book, photography, essay, politics

### Article

*Avec ses quatre dromadaires  
Don Pedro d’Alfaroubeira  
Courut le monde et l’admira.  
Il fit ce que je voudrais faire  
Si j’avais quatre dromadaires.  
Apollinaire*

### Picturing the world

These are the words which open and give the title to Chris Marker’s 1966 film *Si j’avais quatre dromadaires*, a movie made out of hundreds of still photographs from all over the world, “taken in twenty-six countries between 1955 and 1965” (Marker 1967 quoted in Lambert 2008). This particular film clearly exemplifies how the experience of travel has always been an essential aspect of Marker’s much diversified work. As we recall films like *Lettre de Sibérie* (1958), *Sans soleil* (1982) or *Le*

*tombeau d'Alexandre* (1993), or books such as *Coréennes* (1959) or *Le dépayés* (1982), they all attest this central role played by journeys and by distant locations.

From 1954 to 1958 Marker developed an editorial project that evokes the short poem by Apollinaire, for it was, like the travels of the Portuguese prince Don Pedro de Alfaroubeira, about crossing the world and, to a certain extent, about making it visible and admirable in its diversity. Chris Marker worked, during those years, for the publisher Éditions du Seuil directing the travel books series *Petite Planète*, and occasionally contributing with his own photographs or texts. To put it simply, the series consisted in books on countries. Given their general unorthodoxy of word and image combinations, these books could be regarded as alternatives to more conventional guidebooks. Although they included explicit references to the historical developments and the particular costumes of each country, they were not meant to enchant the tourist traveller by providing the usual idyllic descriptions or picturesque views. On the contrary, if they were supposed to captivate readers, it was rather for their capacity to incite puzzlement and to offer less known narratives or unforeseen comments on the countries in question. To be confronted with images of dead people and of executions, as happens for example in the book on China (see Gatti 1957: 91, 103), is an experience rather distant from what is ordinarily expected from a travel book. In general terms, what is so appealing about the *Petite Planète* books is precisely their hybrid quality: their location between objective reportage and subjective account, their combination of poetic impressions with more factual political or cultural histories or their undifferentiated exercise of both approval and denounce.

Additionally, the peculiarity of this series rests fundamentally in its visual dimension, as is put in evidence often in the general literature on Marker. Catherine Lupton, for instance, points out the manner by which the images were displayed in “dynamic layouts that established an unprecedented visual and cognitive relay between texts and images” (Lupton 2004: 44), whereas Nora Alter observes how the “highly pictorial nature of the books in this series reflected Marker’s own interests and inclinations and led directly to his later photo essays” (Alter 2006: 9). Indeed, the images hold an outstanding position for their particular arrangement and composition, in which photographs were frequently combined with drawings, postcards, engravings or advertisements. This interplay of all kinds of images, artistic and popular, in the most various sizes, dates, positions and associations (between each other and between the text) reinforces their impact and unquestionably promotes the emergence of a plurality of meanings. Contrasting however with the several remarks on the series inventive image programme, the absence of in-depth studies on these books remains considerable. In the current contribution, I propose to start with a detailed analysis of a photo-sequence extracted from one specific *Petite Planète* volume, the one on Portugal. Subsequently, I expect this case study to provide some necessary insights to draw wider considerations on the nature of this collection, with a special focus on Marker’s contribution to it.

## Petit Cinéma des Rues ou Les Mystères de Lisbonne

Let us begin with some elementary information on this volume. The book on *Portugal* (Villier 1957), the sixteenth of the collection, profited naturally from Marker's photo edition and was written by Franz Villier, an author who, in 1957, was not completely unknown to Marker. Not only had Villier previously written for the leftist catholic journal *Esprit* (Villier 1952), in which Marker was also a regular collaborator, but Marker himself had already made a review on Villier's 1947 book *Vie et Mort de Richard Winslow* (see Marker 1947).

This particular book on Portugal is not especially dissonant when compared to other volumes of the series, offering the reader the same profuse combination of text and images we find throughout the collection. As in other *Petite Planète* books, visual and verbal discourses are highly emancipated from each other in the sense that neither do images function merely as illustrations of the texts nor do texts serve as commentaries on the images. In some moments, texts and pictures do not seem to bear any relationship whatsoever, while in others, a connection can be established by means of captions or by more or less straightforward associations. Despite their apparent autonomy, images and words inevitably interact at some point and create open possibilities of significance. Besides, it is not unusual to come across photographs deprived of any caption or link to the text, which occupy an entire page in a self-sufficient fashion. Although the pictures in *Petite Planète* books are simply printed and do not offer the formal sophistication typical of more refined travel books of the same years, they yet convey an eye-catching strategy. They become attractive precisely because their incongruence and unconventionality encourage us, as readers, to search for some sense outside them, sometimes in other adjacent pictures, sometimes in our own personal narratives.

As mentioned before, if there is something in the collection that can be regarded as premonitory of later photo-books like *Coréennes* (1959) or *Le dépayés* (1982), it is precisely their essayistic dimension. Moreover, in this particular case, the essay form (a concept I shall later explore) is also a way of questioning the general conventions of photojournalism, the image style traditionally adopted in other photographic travel books. In stark opposition to the principles of alleged transparency and non-manipulated mediation normally ascertained to photojournalistic images, Marker's juxtaposition of photographs is sometimes capable of rising surprise and perplexity, but it does so by refusing to privilege their purely informative dimension. In this refusal, the edited photographs delineate a rather surrealistic quality and appear just as enigmas that demand an engaged but non-obvious decipherment. In a fundamental text on the nature of the essayistic form, Adorno pointed out the hybrid features of the essay and its ludic dimension, where terms like luck and play are rarely absent. And he noted also that "the essay", in its open manifestation of a subjective voice, "has something like an aesthetic autonomy" (Adorno 1991: 4).

Considering again the book on Portugal and the ingenious arrangement of its pictures, I would like to focus now on a particular moment where the autonomy of images with regard to the texts is sharply evident. I am concretely alluding to a sequence of six pages and six photographs (one picture per page) we find, apart from the text, after the chapter devoted to the city of Lisbon. This sequence, which can be designated as a short photo-essay, is entitled *Petit cinéma des rues ou les Mystères de Lisbonne* (Figures 1 to 3) and all six images are photographs taken by Marker himself. Significantly enough, this fact allows us to rectify the information, as sustained by Catherine Lupton, that Marker had provided pictures for only two of the volumes of the collection: the ones on China and on USSR (Lupton 2004: 45). In fact, he also supplied photos for the volume on Portugal, contributing extensively with twenty-two pictures, six of which constitute the previously mentioned sequence.

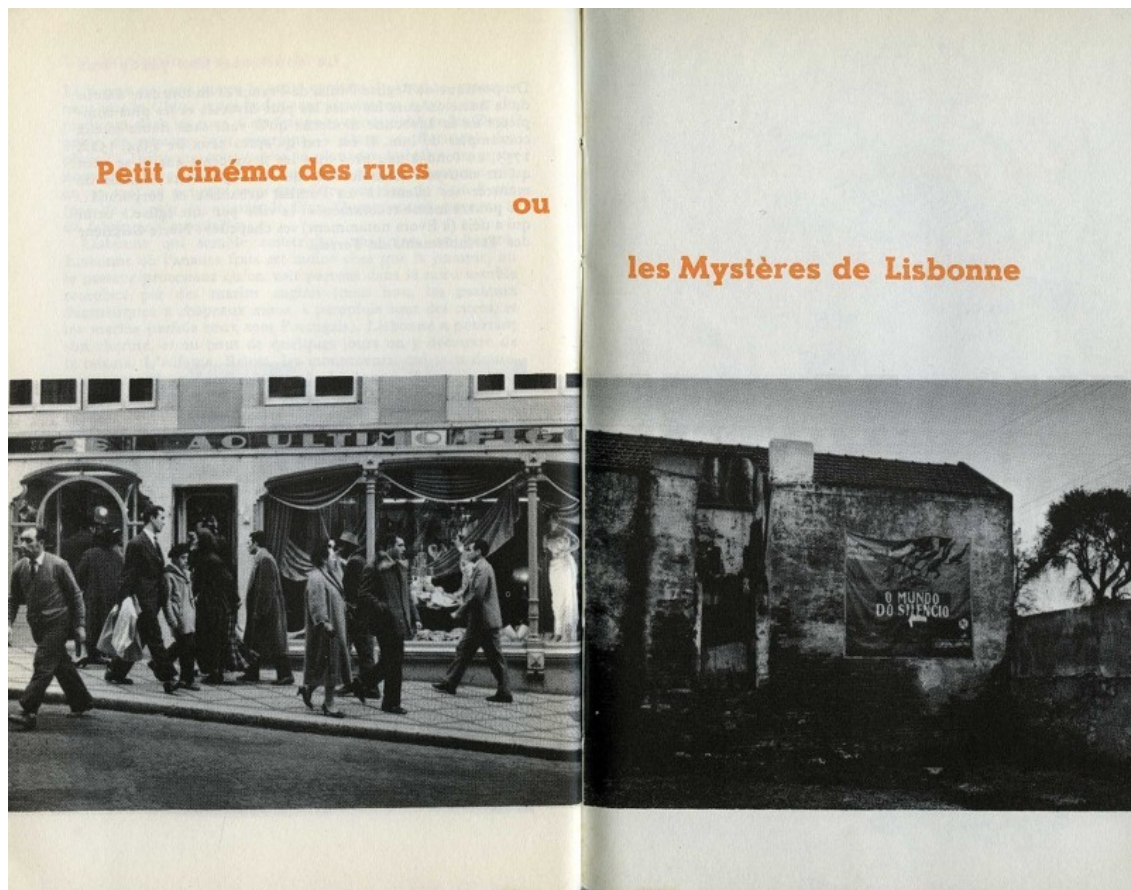


Figure 1 © Chris Marker





Figure 2 © Chris Marker

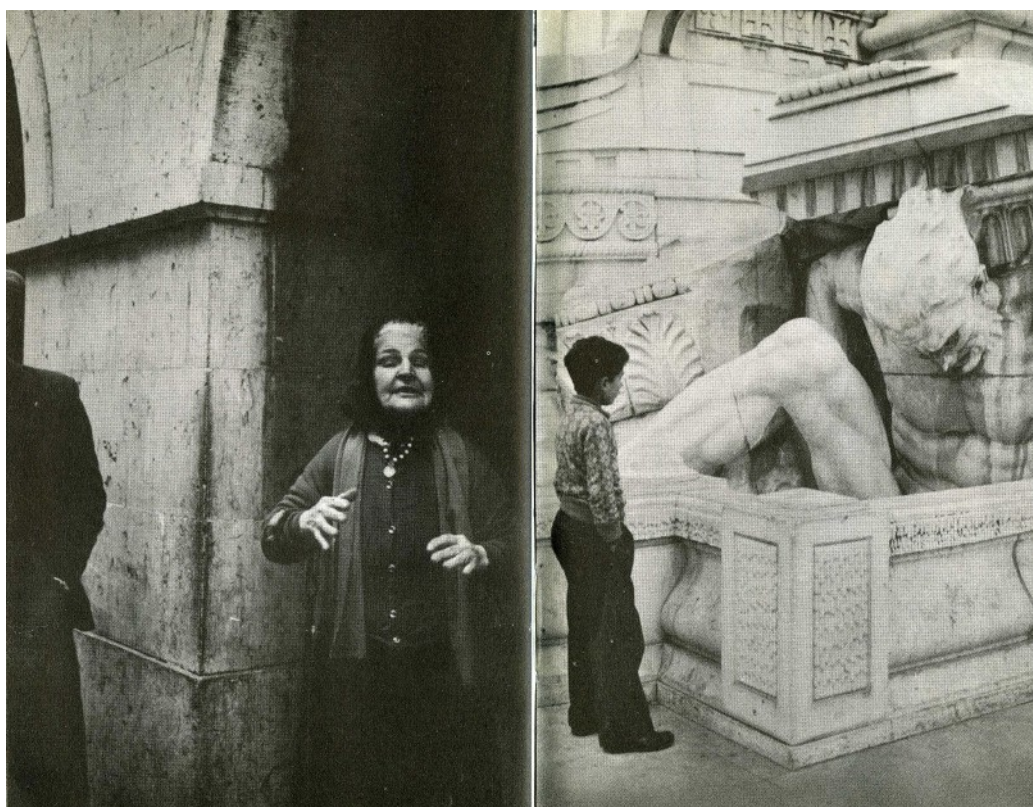


Figure 3 © Chris Marker



As we pay attention to the title of this visual essay on Lisbon, it points directly to the literary universe and to a tradition that goes as far as the nineteenth century, with works such as Eugène Sue's *Les Mystères de Paris* (1842-43), George Reynolds' *The Mysteries of London* (1845) or Émile Zola's *Les Mystères de Marseille* (1867). The reference to cinema within the book format on the other hand, reminds us that it will not be the first time in Marker's work where we find this tendency to merge different media. The *Petite Planète* volume on China includes two photo-sequences respectively named *Court-Métrage 1. Lundi à Pékin* and *Court-Métrage 2. Images de la Révolution Chinoise* (Gatti 1957: 16-18 and 98-105). Accordingly, his 1959 book *Coréennes* is the only published volume of Seuil's *Court-métrage* series, and we can also rapidly evoke his landmark film *La Jetée* (1962), whose subtitle is 'un photo-roman'. At another level, and in the concrete book on Portugal, two of the constituting chapters are direct appropriations of film titles – *La comtesse aux pieds nus*, (a 1954 film by Joseph L. Mankiewicz) and *Ô saisons, ô châteaux...* (a quote of Rimbaud used in a 1957 short film by Agnès Varda). All these reversed correspondences clearly indicate what Nora Alter described as "the author's attempt to blur distinctions between the media of film and print" (Alter 2006: 9). Nevertheless, in *Petit cinéma des rues ou les Mystères de Lisbonne*, there are however several other aspects, despite the blurring of media specificities, I would like to take in consideration.

In the first place, and in an immediate contact with the images, there is a pronounced surrealist resonance to them. These photographs do not show any clear-cut tourist attraction and the view of Lisbon they convey is marked by a fragmentary assemblage of pictures that shows street scenes together with rather strange views, like the one in which one can read the words 'O Mundo do Silêncio' ('The World of Silence') on a solid wall with no doors or entrances in a deserted, abandoned place. Sometimes the street scenes are punctuated with bizarre elements like a big hand hanging on the street (that is actually part of the advertisement strategy of a glove shop), or the presence of weird characters in rather incomprehensible actions such as an old woman under an arch, who stands with closed eyes (is she blind?) and half raised hands, in an attitude suggesting talking or maybe singing. In the last image for example, a young boy observes, in a rather puzzled yet nonchalant way, a colossal sculpted figure that seems to sustain the unbearable weight of a building on his shoulders. We find these rather enigmatic scenes side by side, with no apparent connection with each other, reinforcing the ambiguous meaning and the ambivalent function of this sort of images in a travel book.

The influence surrealism had on photographic practices is wide and well-known. Surrealists in particular, understood travel as a kind of method which could enable them to have "an encounter with some kind of otherness which might also destabilise and transform them" (Osborne 2000: 166). But Peter Osborne goes further in the proximity between surrealism and travel and extends it, like Peter Galassi had previously done, to an approximation between surrealism and photojournalistic/humanist photography. He uses the example of Cartier-Bresson's photographic approach, highlighting how

much it is based on the possibilities of the encounter between the “stranger-photographer” and the “stranger-subjects” as source of moral and aesthetic power. Galassi additionally maintains that the “surrealist strategies of Cartier-Bresson depend on or are derived from the effects and opportunities furnished by travel” (Galassi 1987: 35 quoted in Osborne 2000). He further indicates some of Bresson’s methods: the “juxtaposition” of things as a means to create associative effects or the surrealist procedure of “dépaysement”, the dislocation of things and people from their “expected spatial or narrative context” in order to “release hidden poetic force” (Galassi 1987: 35). Osborne explains that the term “dépaysement” means to be removed, sometimes removed from one’s country (pays) or from home, going further on the argument that this rupture with the familiar is the condition of a traveller, to whom the everyday becomes strange and the strange everyday (Osborne 2000: 166).

This apparent detour in the direction of surrealist strategies of photography exemplified by Cartier-Bresson, may be read also with regard to the case of Marker’s work in the *Petite Planète* book on Portugal. I don’t want to proclaim direct connections between Bresson’s and Marker’s photographs. What is at stake is that Marker’s short sequence on Lisbon puts in evidence the surrealist methodologies of free association and dislocation of things from their most usual narrative context. In a travel book, these images engage the reader not by showing the attractions he may see in Portugal, but rather by putting in evidence the unpredictability of the encounters he may possibly experience. The sequence witnesses a clear refusal of commonplace images of Lisbon, replacing beautifying views of the city by others which hold the incongruity of ordinary life and therefore open towards multiple readings. Such is the case of the already mentioned second photograph (Figure 1, right) where a poster hanging from a big old wall of an indistinct building reads ‘O Mundo do Silêncio’ (‘The World of Silence’). Everything looks bizarre, starting with this very picture being included in a travel book where, normally, more favourable and laudatory images are expected. This photo configures the antipodes of a typical touristic experience, which is normally characterised by the contrast with everyday life. This picture does not display any elements close to what is normally understood as a tourist attraction: it lacks all sorts of markers that would enable it to be perceived as such, and it looks unlikely to be inscribed in any historical or national narrative. It looks more as a tourist photograph than as a seducing picture for a possible traveller. But it nonetheless embodies, as a photograph, what Benjamin named the political power of cinema: to see and to show the everyday differently – or perhaps more accurately – than in immediate perception (see Benjamin 2008).

Interestingly enough, maybe some of the oddity we now detect in the image might have been less present for viewers who were able to recognize the poster. It is indeed a sign advertising the film *Le Monde du Silence*, a documentary on the underwater discoveries of Jacques Cousteau, co-directed by Cousteau himself and Louis Malle in 1956. The poster was originally in French as in the upper left corner it is still possible to perceive a subtitle reading ‘une prodigieuse révélation’ – only the title was

covered by a strip with its Portuguese version. So what we see in this photograph could not have been more trivial: a film ad in a wall big enough to support it. However, its banality serves only to increase its inadequacy in a travel book – no French traveller would travel to Portugal and be interested in watching this film. Besides, contingent elements were normally excluded from the mainstream travel books of those years. What emerges from this example is not its primary informative function, as no traveller would be particularly concerned with the reference to Cousteau's documentary. So what sense can be extracted from this particular image in this specific context? I believe that the key to understand this apparent incoherence depends on the replacement of the image's factual information by a more symbolic and poetic kind of information which allows to expand the range of interpretations. On the one hand, one could think of the surrealist penchant for the poetry of the everyday while on the other hand, as a possible reading, one could also take this 'Mundo do Silêncio' as a figurative extrapolation to the Portuguese circumstances of that time. Portugal can be interpreted as that 'world of silence': a country where people were indeed very silent, for their freedom of expression was much limited by the all-controlling organs of Salazar dictatorial regime. And by the same motives, the outside world was also extremely silent to the Portuguese, given the filtration and selection of only acceptable material. This is simply one possible reading, reinforced by the sense of desolation and abandonment that also transpires from the picture, but of course, it does not invalidate other suitable interpretations.

Looking now to entire cycle of images, it is also remarkable to notice how Marker plays with the format of the book, turning each double-page into a set of contrasts. The first duo opposes a view of a crowded and hectic street to an empty and 'silent' photograph; the second pair presents, on the left, a traditional-looking woman and, on the right, a modernly-dressed man; and the last couple of images sketches a contrasting dialogue between an old lady on one page, and a young boy on the other. The fact that a country or a city (and ultimately an national identity) are frequently built up of contrasting realities is something the photographic edition seems to highlight here.

But other elements become visible in the arrangement of these pictures, namely the non-concordance with more established codes of representation, especially evident in the figures of women (Figure 2, left and Figure 3, left). In these two photographs, the viewer distinguishes rather typically Portuguese women, whose typicality is reinforced both by their age and by their external appearance, defined by elements such as their hair fashion or their accessories (apron, shawl, kerchief). However, even though these women are close to what may be named as typically Portuguese, they are portrayed in a rather unconventional manner. The first one holds no exceptional feature as she is merely walking the street, going from an indistinct place to another. The picture, however, captured her passing in front of a café, a place almost exclusively reserved for men in the Portugal of those years, in a situation which also appears to allude to the conservative structures of a society where modernity seems to be a masculine attribute (as visible in Figure 2, right) while women are more easily associated with tradition and long-established roles. The picture of the second female figure, surreal and mystifying as it is, depicts again

someone who is far from having a representative role in more expected terms. In both cases, the portrayed women, recognisable in their typicality, are not represented as customary types. Particularly in the last case, the old lady appears in a half-delirious kind of suspension, side by side with the picture of the little boy, defining a correspondence that outlines a temporal dynamics of past (the lady) and future (the boy). It is the youngster as well who, in an exteriority inherent to his role as spectator, is looking at a sight of struggle and domination, possibly evocative of the Portuguese colonial situation, increasingly unbearable.

Most importantly, what comes forth in these pictures and in the whole sequence is a personal construction of a visual text which is, by the lack of captions or other customary decoding tools, extremely subjective, both from the creative as from the reception point of view. The combination of images turns out to be, according to the title, extremely cinematographic and seems to convoke the principles of filmic montage, even if no univocal narrative can be identified. If regarded as a film, like Marker seems to put it, *Petit cinéma des rues ou les Mystères de Lisbonne* would fit in the formal system Bordwell named as “associational”. In his general work on film, Bordwell draws a major divide between narrative and a non-narrative formal systems, based on the principle that some films are centred on a narrative, a chain of events in cause-effect relationship occurring in time and space (Bordwell 1993: 65), while others are not. Then, focusing solely on non-narrative films, he proposes a sub-categorization which follows four different types of formal systems: a) the *categorical*, when the subject of the film is divided into parts or categories; b) the *rhetorical*, when the film provides evidence for a particular argument; c) the *abstract*, in which the audience attention is drawn to the abstract visual and sonic qualities of the things depicted; and d) the *associational*, which works through the juxtaposition of loosely connected images to suggest an emotion or a concept to the spectator (see Bordwell 1993: 102-3).

As has been apparent, Marker’s short sequence on Lisbon shares many of the properties articulated by the associational formal system of non-narrative films. By juxtaposing photographs with no evident link between each other, the reader is encouraged to seek a possible association that might bind them together, in a process somewhat “comparable to the techniques of metaphor or simile used in lyric poetry” (Bordwell 1993: 128). In the associational model, the conceptual connection expected from the viewer can be straightforward or, as in the case of the pictures on Lisbon, strongly perplexing. No matter how biased and individualistic a construction the pictures of Marker may be, they require the reader’s engagement while at the same time remaining open to diverse apprehensions. Based on this particular aspect, I would like to address the essayistic character of Marker’s photo editing more closely, relying this time not on Adorno’s considerations on the essay, but rather on the ones developed by Vilém Flusser.

## **The essay between commitment and change**

Flusser's text *Essays* starts from a primary question of whether one should formulate one's thoughts in an "academic" or in an "essayistic style" (Flusser 2002: 192). This comparative opposition between what he calls "treatises" (subjects treated in an academic style) and "essays" (in a subjective style) leads us to stimulating conclusions about the nature of the essay which I believe can be relevant to Chris Marker's procedures in the book on Portugal. The choice for one style in detriment of the other, he goes on, has immediate implications since the differences between the two are not only about their form but also about their content. "There does not exist one idea that can be articulated in two ways. Two different sentences are two different thoughts. [...] The arguments presented will be different, the conclusions reached will be different, and only the topic itself will apparently remain the same" (Flusser 2002: 192). Similarly, in a travel book, the choice for a clear and informative photographic style or for an essayistic one, like Marker did, involves a stark difference in thoughts and ideas. The country in question may in principle remain the same, but the two different styles already suggest dissimilar approaches and messages.

Flusser continues his argument (clearly pro-essay style) by indicating how the academic style characteristically, and artificially, avoids the use of pronoun 'I', privileging the responsibility of rigor rather than a personal responsibility. In the short photo-essay about Lisbon, the personal engagement of Marker in his subjective voice can be easily sensed. There is no avoiding, but rather a reaffirmation of his own 'I' in the essayistic succession of images. Choosing for the essay is then, in Flusser's words, an "existential decision, in the strict sense of the term. It will determine my attitude about my topic, and about those who will read my text, 'my others'" (Flusser 2002: 193). Also in this case, I find that the choice for the photographic essay is revealing of a certain way to conceptualize the topic, the country, along with a particular mode of considering and expecting something from the book readers, "the others". This choice already denounces an approach and a personal commitment that would not have been possible in other form. In the definition of a sharp dichotomy between treatises and essays, Flusser asserts that in a treatise, "I will think about my subject and I will discuss it with my others. In an essay, I will live my subject and I will have a dialogue with my others. In the first case, I will seek to explain my topic; in the second I will seek to implicate myself in it. In the first case I will seek to inform my others; in the second I will seek to change them. My decision, therefore, will depend on how I face my topic and my others" (Flusser 2002: 193).

I consider the formulation of Flusser on the essay as a very enlightening one with regard to the sequence on Lisbon. The decision to pick up the essay as photographic form accounts for Marker's

personal implication in his subject and, at the same time, reveals the way he regards his viewers and what kind of effects he seeks to provoke in them. This perspective is not contradictory with another Flusserian conception of photographs as images of the future. Pictures in travel books are clear examples of this anticipatory feature, as they are supposed to model the reader's behaviours and perceptions, awakening the desire to travel and to experience things according to a certain predisposition. By including such peculiar sequence in a travel book on Portugal, Marker is engaging himself in the job of modifying his reader's perceptions. The kind of images integrating *Petit cinéma des rues ou les Mystères de Lisbonne*, despite looking down on typical touristic pictures, may nonetheless arise the desire to travel to Lisbon, on the basis of another kind of experience. It is an experience that puts the stress on chance encounters, on a certain idea of veracity that might be found in ordinary views and that fundamentally opposes the uplifting and unnatural pictures circulating in touristic circuits. We find in Chris Marker's photo-editing a refusal of the characteristic tourist role and a proposal of its replacement by another sort of traveller, probably equally romanticized. I am inclined to regard the photographs of this book as establishing a rupture towards a certain reader typology, a reader/tourist that would tranquilly and passively see the country *through* limpid and transparent photographs, as in the photojournalistic tradition. In this book, photographs render a view on the world that, in its unconventional dimension, is assumedly forged by a subjective authorial mediation. Defining an uneasy relationship with photography's paradigm of transparency, the readers of these photographs do not see *through* them: they bump *against* pictures and are therefore requested to actively participate in a coherent construction of meaning. We can recall Flusser stating that "the essay does not explain its topic, so in this sense it does not inform its readers. On the contrary, it transforms its topic into an enigma" (Flusser 2002: 194). The photographs chosen by Marker have the same enigmatic qualities to them. And maybe it is not pure chance that the sequence title is also *Mysteries of Lisbon*. Their meaning is not univocal and has to be unveiled by an engaged viewer who may add multiple senses to those unclosed images. The short photo-essay on Lisbon is not only a example of Marker's personal engagement in the way he wanted to treat his topic (the way he wanted to visually represent Portugal) but gives also evidence on the way he faces his *others*, the readers expected to commit themselves in the active processing of deciphering of the visual text. They are expected to become implicated in the topic. As a remark on the essay's dangers, Flusser points out the risk of losing the topic by being so much implicated in it. But then, he concludes, is also part of its beauty and that's what makes it attractive.

### **Toward a politics of uncertainty**

Turning again to the book *Portugal*, it is important to make clear that the selected sequence is not the prevalent model for the arrangement of pictures in the entire book. This short essay is only a small

fraction of the book, particularly relevant for being unique and unrepeated. In the rest of the book as in other volumes of *Petite Planète*, the position images occupy is not so evidently exorbitant – the layout is more conventional and pictures frequently hold a caption pointing to the verbal contents. However, my decision to focus on the overtly essayistic sequence on Lisbon serves me as an emblematic example for the totality of the book and of the collection, in the sense that other images, although in a more discrete way, also follow a somewhat essayistic composition, hybrid by nature and with cinematographic qualities.

The *Petite Planète* books generally make use of photographs and of their documentary-value only to “demythologize”, like Jonathan Kear wrote about Marker’s subsequent oeuvre, the solidity of ‘objective’ documentary and of documentary history (see Kear 2005: 50, 55). Moreover, what remains visible in the entire series directed by Marker is the political potential conveyed by such photographic montage. In an analysis of Marker’s 1982 film *Sans Soleil*, Kia Lindroos highlights precisely how the politics of this film is to be found not in its story but especially in the way of telling it by means of a non-linear narrative. In the same light, I want to claim also that Marker’s photographic edition for *Petite Planète* can be regarded as a political choice, according to what Lindroos designated as “politics of disorder” (Lindroos 1999: 18). The arrangement of photographs in these books, in their essayistic juxtaposition of different times and subjects, defines a non-linearity that, among other aspects, greatly “attacks the homogeneous time of social narratives” (Lindroos 1999: 17).

This series obviously reflects Marker’s plain opposition to deeply established national narratives, especially if related to totalitarian or colonial regimes (about the particular case of Portugal see Martins 2008). But despite his personal political thought, the central political dimension of these photographs lies fundamentally on the confusing and provocative effect of their assemblage. In their visual organization, they disturb common homogeneous views on the world and they disrupt the supposed continuity of historical narratives. By putting such a strong emphasis in their constructed/artistic dimension, they seem to alert the viewer that national and historic narratives can be told in a different manner. The way in which images of the past are put side by side with images of the present is confronting, and exposes how history or nation are normally based on one (possible) narrative, that is always re-interpreted at the light of the present. But if the present is the condition to tackle the past, and the past can therefore change according to the perspectives of the present, the image we have of the past is also determinant to the way we look at the present. Furthermore, even if these photographs, isolated, are usually perceived according to documentary conventions, their essayistic organization opens up the way, as in cinema, to a fictional territory. Marker brings his photo-essays and historical national narratives together in the same domain of constructed fiction. In this sense, Marker’s work exemplifies the standpoint of Rancière, according to whom “the logic of

descriptive and narrative arrangements in fiction becomes fundamentally indistinct from the arrangement used in the description and interpretation of the phenomena of the social and historical world” (Rancière 2006: 37).

If in the photographic arrangements of Marker “the real must be fictionalised in order to be thought” (Rancière 2006: 38), it nonetheless remains a central aspect of his work. In his recent study (Lambert 2008), Arnaud Lambert recalls an article Marker wrote in 1949 for *Esprit* in which he stated that the invented castles of Fritz Lang were less surprising than the staircases of Eisenstein, concluding that “le destin du cinéma n’est pas dans l’évasion, mais dans l’analyse de la réalité” (Marker 1949). Nevertheless, Marker is not alone in such a claim. This stance is typical of a certain Bazinian ideology of cinema which dominated the same circles that attracted Marker, from *Esprit* to *Cahiers du Cinéma*. Considering his work for *Petite Planète* in this context, it becomes quite clear how the fictional strategy provided by the essayistic composition of pictures was a means by which reality was reconsidered, but never avoided. By highlighting the essayistic character of Marker’s photo-edition in the book on Portugal, I intended essentially to stress how his contribution for the *Petite Planète* involves a personal implication and how it presupposes a viewer capable of self-commitment as well. This commitment is a fundamental condition for a reading of images which, ultimately, should encapsulate a possibility of change to the reader himself.

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